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THE NOVELS OF RHODA BROUGHTON.

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NANCY.
RED AS A ROSE IS SHE.
COMETH UP AS A FLOWER.
GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART!
NOT WISELY BUT TOO WELL.

The above is an uniform Edition, containing all the Novels written by Miss Broughton.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

JOAN

A Tale

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON

AUTHOR OF

"COMETH UP AS A FLOWER" "RED AS A ROSE IS SHE" "GOOD-BYE SWEETHEART!" "NANCY" "NOT WISELY BUT TOO WELL"

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen

1876

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JOAN.

LIBRARY OF THE

PART I.—*Continued.*

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE enormous winter night has trailed its slow length away; the puny winter dawn is tardily showing its ash-gray face above the horizon. All night Joan has been wrestling with her woe; and when the sickly new sun looks dimly in at her frozen window-pane, he finds her palely victorious. Victorious, not indeed over pain, for that bids to be long-lived; not over love, for that is deathless, but over self.

All night through she has struggled and striven; all night her meagre pillow has been drenched with her hot salt tears; all night ugly and maddening visions of her dear love with another head than hers on his broad breast; with other arms than hers laced about his neck, float, painted on the canvas of the dark, before her streaming eyes. All night she has cried out that the cup is too bitter—that the knife is too sharp—that whether God or man have done it, it is very ill-done; and lo! when morning comes, the cup is emptied to the dregs; the knife is sheathed in her quivering heart, and she, with a victor's wan smile, says, "It is well!"

In very little more than four months, he has forgotten and replaced her; he, that with such wet gray eyes—with such a broken voice, swore that whether on Time's shore, or Eternity's gray strand, his arms would always be outstretched to receive her. So be it! If it is more for his well-being and

comfort to forget than to remember, then this is well done too.

She has poured out all her costliest pearls at his feet; and he—he has tossed her a few paltry beads, that broke in the handling. What then? They were the best he had. And what has true love to do with the worth of the loved? It does not weigh out in drachms and scruples; so many grains to this virtue; so many to that grace; it gives bountifully with both hands. She has given to him bountifully with both hands; and what she has given, she can by no means take back.

"To love is the great glory, the last culture, the highest happiness; to be loved is little in comparison!"

Because God has set her among the lonely ones of this earth; those who come first in no one's prayers; who have no stake in the coming generation, would she destine him also to this gray doom—this parched half-

life? a fate which sometimes ennobles and makes more selfless a woman, but almost always worsens a man! If this be love, then away with such love, that is featured like hate! Down with it! down with it into the dust!

"God keep you, Anthony!" she said to him, when they kissed each other weepingly by the curling moonlit waves. "God keep you, Anthony!" she says still.

Yes; God keep him! in his bliss now, as in his pain then—the pain that was so short and easily physicked!

* * * * *

Joan is dressed now. She has been standing for five minutes before her looking-glass, with a Turkish towel in her hand; trying whether severest friction can bring any colour that will stay longer than two seconds into her ashy cheeks. For indeed the face that the glass—the one with the crack across it—gives her back, frightens even herself.

Purple thickened eyelids, swollen to double their natural size; dim buried eyes, whose very colour seems to be washed away from iris and pupil; a little miserable pinched nose, and tremulous blue lips.

"Since this time yesterday I have added ten years to my age," she says aloud; "I might well pass for thirty: at this rate, by Saturday, I shall be eighty; and not a well-preserved eighty either!"

She smiles bitterly; then, making a grim reverence to her own image: "Marie Antoinette on her way to the scaffold!" she says; "is the parallel complete? has my hair turned gray too?"

She puts her face closer to the decrepit mirror, and lifting the thick sleek hair that overlies her milk-white brow, pries curiously among its burnished strands. No! grief, that has ravaged her face, has passed harmlessly by her love-locks. They still look young and happy.

"I must sit with my back to the light!" she says, replacing the Turkish towel on its rail in despair. But not even this expedient —not even the shabby yellow light of a January morning—not even the preoccupation of her family, save her from the observation that she dreads.

"I will say, Joan," remarks Mrs. Moberley, regarding her niece with that steadfastness of stare, that unblenching continuity of gaze which it is the triste prerogative of near relations to employ towards each other—"I will say, Joan, that I never saw any one whom hard weather suited so ill as it does you; I could not have believed that a healthy English girl could be so shrivelled up by a few degrees of frost! now if you had taken my advice, and put on flannel waistcoats at the beginning of the winter: or, if not flannel—some people cannot bear the feel of flannel next their skin—if not flannel, those nice spun silk ones——"

"I should have been quite a fine woman by now—rosy and well-nourished—a credit to the establishment!" interrupts Joan with a laugh—a real bonâ fide voluntary laugh. She would have laughed had she been by herself, with no one to look on, at the idea of this new nostrum for a love pain—flannel waistcoats for a broken heart! "no! no!" (shaking her head)—"I am afraid not! I am afraid I am a radical constitutional scarecrow!"

"I declare it looks as if we starved you!" pursues Mrs. Moberley, fuming, and eying with extreme dissatisfaction her niece's languid willowy figure and small lily-pale face.

"Do you think that change of air would do me good?" asks Joan, lifting her heavy eyes to her aunt's large and disturbed countenance; "you know many doctors think it a sovereign remedy!—no, I am not joking, I have been reflecting that perhaps after all I had better close with the offer, over which I

have been so long demurring, of that lady in ——shire; the salary is certainly very small —almost invisibly so" (with a pale smile)— "and so are the children, it seems; probably I shall not be much more than a *bonne*, but everything must have a beginning; it is a mistake to be too nice, and—and—perhaps this air *is* too keen for me!"

"What!" cries Mrs. Moberley, stopping dead short in her occupation of softly and slowly chafing her spectacle-glasses with her pocket-handkerchief. "What! run away just as all these gay doings are coming on?—such doings as, in all probability, Helmsley will not see again for another five and twenty years—not until" (with a laugh), "not until the next Anthony Wolferstan comes of age!"

Joan turns her head away sick and shuddering. Her aunt's words seem to have opened a window into Wolferstan's future—a window through which she, standing outside in the

cold—always outside in the cold—may peep and see his unshared felicity, the warm every-day human bliss of which she will make no smallest part. It is a moment or so before she can master her voice. Then she speaks.

"It does seem a pity," she answers tranquilly, "but you see my year of mourning is not ended yet: I should be sorry to go to anything very gay before that had expired; so perhaps it is as well to be out of the way of temptation."

"*Your year of mourning!*" repeats Mrs. Moberley, with a withering emphasis; "who ever heard of shutting yourself up a whole year for a grandfather? what more could you do, pray, if he had been your husband?—well, well!" (in a voice which aims at but misses an indifferent and impartial candour of tone): "well, well! it is your business, not mine! but I will say that, of late days, everything seems to have turned topsy-turvy! it is not one here and one there; but *all* the gray heads are on

the green shoulders!—when I was your age, there would not have been much need to dragoon *me* to a ball!"

So Joan has her sad will, and girds up her loins once more to breast the stormy waves of this world's troublesome sea alone. It will be to her probably a harsher, rougher world than has been that small slatternly yet kindly one, to whose tender mercies she was consigned one yellow April evening, now nearly nine months ago. And yet to her own heart she says that she defies any new nine months to bring her such deep and varied pain—such pin-pricks of humiliation—such sword-thrusts of agony as the last nine months have done. By the next post she signs herself away into bondage—bondage certainly—though what degree or manner of bondage she herself hardly cares to speculate. Pay pitiful! position menial! So be it. The only thing with regard to her new life, that seems to Miss Dering of the least account is, that the scene

of it should be laid as far as possible from the sound of Helmsley church bells. Whither? —nay—any whither, so as to be beyond the reach of Anthony's joy-bells.

It is well that Joan has steeled herself not only to hear but to pronounce her late lover's name, without any quiver of eyelid, flutter of colour, or uncertainty of voice; for, henceforward, for many days, that name is seldom absent for five minutes together from one or other of the tongues of the Portland Villa household. Colonel Wolferstan and his betrothed divide between them the honour of forming the staple of the Moberley talk. Every half-hour now brings some fresh and authentic piece of information on the all-engrossing topic; and every new half-hour contradicts and repudiates its predecessor.

"The marriage is to take place next week!" "It is not to take place for six months!" "The ceremony is to be performed at Westminster Abbey!" "It is to be performed at

St. George's, Hanover Square!" "It is to be performed by special licence in their own drawing-room!" "There are to be six bridesmaids in veils and wreaths!" "There are to be twelve bridesmaids in bonnets!" "There are to be no bridesmaids at all!" "The young couple are to live with the old people at the Abbey!" "The young couple are to build a house for themselves on the Wolferstan estate in ——shire!" "The young couple are to travel for a year!" "He has been in love with her for ten years!" "They were betrothed in their cradles!" "They met for the first time last autumn!" etc., etc.

By-and-by these rumours become both fewer and more harmonious. They contract and shrink into the following compact body of certainties:

The marriage is to take place in a fortnight, the ceremony is to be performed at St. James's, Piccadilly. One right reverend, one venerable, and two reverends are to tie

the knot. The wedding feast is to be held at the family residence in Dover Street. Beeves are to die and ale-casks to be broached for the regaling of the day-labourers and cotters on the Wolferstan estate on the wedding-day; but all such festivities as regard the gentry, tradespeople, and farmers, are to be reserved till the return of the wedded lovers from their honeymoon.

Is not there food enough here for speculation, for hope, for joy! The days fly past—Joan counts them as they go. There is neither pleasure nor profit in them, yet would she fain weight them with lead. To every setting sun she bids good-bye with a sicker heart. On every tardy dawn she opens more unwilling eyes. The church bells have already begun to practise their peals; every evening she can hear the ringers perfecting themselves in their carillons.

It is the eve of the wedding now. All day the rain has streamed down upon the

sloppy earth, all nature is of the consistency of porridge. Rain pure and simple, rain mixed with sleet, rain pure and simple again. Joan has longed with an unutterable longing for fresh air, for solitude, for the sea—the wrathy, masterful, winter sea—

"For her heart was heavy—oh!
Heavy was her heart!"

But all three are equally unattainable. The short dwarfed day is drawing in now, and she stands by the window looking towards the west. The sun, hidden all day, is giving one puny shadow of a good-night smile before sinking into his gray billow bed; the sun which, when next he waxes, will shine upon Anthony's nuptial pomp. Mrs. Moberley has drawn up her chair to the window too, to make the most of the waning light, and, with spectacles astride on her nose, is reading aloud in short-winded recitative, the Helmsley paper, which has just arrived.

"'For the information of our fair readers we may state that the bride's dress will be of white satin trimmed with Brussels lace. The bridesmaids will be the Lady Alicia Kerr and the Lady Mabel Kerr, cousins of the bridegroom, and the Honourable Letitia Wentworth and the Honourable Susan Wentworth, cousins of the bride. We understand that the bridesmaids' dresses will be of white *poult de soie*, polonaises of white *damassé*, trimmed with white ostrich feathers, white Rubens felt hats trimmed with ostrich feathers. The bridegroom's best man will be his brother, Mr. Fulke Wolferstan!' And then come the presents. Dear me! three columns of them. Why there must be over two hundred!"

"Are there many Helmsley names?" asks Bell, looking over her mother's shoulder at the list of donors; "I wish that we had given something—any trifle just to show goodwill—and people will be sure to look for

our names; knowing on what intimate terms we were with him."

"How badly they print these things nowadays!" says Mrs. Moberley, holding the paper at arm's length and staring hard at it through her spectacles. "Here, Joan, you are doing nothing—your eyes are younger than mine—read us aloud the list of the presents!"

Joan turns heavily away from the window, and taking the paper from her aunt's hand, complies.

"'The Marchioness of Caledon, bracelet, gold and pearl; the Countess of Dorset, parure, emeralds and diamonds; the Honourable Lady Landon, pendant, opals and diamonds,'" and so on for three columns. They swim before her eyes now and then—the pendants, the tiaras, the chatelaines, the etuis—but she holds out gallantly till the end, till the tale begun so gloriously with a Marchioness and a bracelet, dwindles away into a Miss and a blotting-book.

"What a number of great people they seem to know!" says Mrs. Moberley, in a respectful voice; "and I am sure that you would never guess it from Anthony's conversation. I do not think I ever heard him mention a member of the peerage in my life!"

"What a number of bracelets!" cries Bell, with an envious sigh. "How many, Joan? Count!"

Joan complies.

"There are twenty-one!"

"She may put on a fresh one every day for three weeks!" says Bell, with the rapidity of a ready reckoner. "What luck some people have!"

"And how many lockets, Joan?" asks Diana, leaning her elbows on the table, and framing her little eager rosy face with her dimpled hands.

Joan's slender finger travels up the column once again.

"There are fourteen!"

"She may put on a new one every day for a fortnight!" says Diana, drawing a long breath; "and then they tell you that happiness is equally divided!"

"But has the bridegroom given nothing?" asks Bell, curiosity for the moment getting the better of envy; "are you sure that you have missed nothing, Joan? He must surely have contributed something handsome!"

"Has not he contributed himself?" asks Mrs. Moberley, with a jolly laugh; "I do not think that he could well have contributed anything handsomer! I suppose he thinks that that is enough!"

Joan lays down the paper, shivering a little. Enough?—yes, enough in all conscience.

* * * * *

Wolferstan's wedding-day has come. No longer *coming*, it has *come*. It is here. No more need Joan's eyes grudgingly watch the breaking of each new dawn: no more need

her sad wishes try to delay the fall of each new night. Dread is no more, for the dreaded has arrived. And Joan is still at Portland Villa. Fate, after all, will not spare her the hearing of Anthony's wedding chimes. At the last moment her employer has put her off, intimating that she will not require her to enter upon her duties till after the expiration of another month. So Joan stays.

In the relations between masters and servants, it is the servants who can dictate terms, and the masters who must come in to them. Nowadays, he or she who neglects to obey his or her cook's lightest whim may, in all likelihood, go cookless to the end of the chapter; but in the education market matters are widely different. In the latter the supply is as immensely in excess of the demand, as in the former the demand is in excess of the supply.

Anthony's wedding-day has come. Neither God nor man has stepped in to prevent it;

and the sun, which for a fortnight past has shone for neither king nor tinker, shines for him. The sun and Anthony were always friends. Almost all Joan's recollections of him are mixed with fair weather and sunshine. She has opened her window that looks to the dim red east. She herself has sunk down on her knees beside the poor bed, with arms outflung over the worn counterpane and ruffled brown head down sunk upon them.

"Oh, love! love!" she says, with an exceeding bitter cry; "God give you fair weather always! God save you from pain like this! God lift you to the higher life!"

The tears rush in hot salt plenty to her eyes, but she commands them back. To-day of all days, God wot, she must be dry-eyed and merry. Throughout the morning an electrical river of excitement seems to be running in the Moberleys' veins. Employment of any sort seems impossible to them, nor do they attempt any. With eyes turned

alternately to the clock, and to the prayer-books opened at the marriage service on their laps, Mrs. Moberley and Bell (for Diana is, for the most part, quiescent) follow the bridal party step by step, through the programme announced by the Helmsley journal.

"They must have reached the church by now, Bell!—how many carriages I wonder? nearly all private ones, I daresay?"

"They must be arranged before the altar now: I hope the bridegroom has not forgotten the ring."

"As likely as not this very minute she is saying 'I will'; I hope she speaks up—I do like a bride to speak up."

"I can almost hear him say 'I, Anthony, take thee, Lalage!' Dear me, what lovely names!—and they go so well together." After a while: "We ought to hear the bells soon! they were to telegraph down the moment it was over, so that they might strike up here at once!"

Bell has opened the window in order the better to hear. The crisp air comes in with a cold rush, but who can be cold to-day ?"

"It is one o'clock !" cries Bell, with a lengthening face; "I cannot account for it ! —can anything have happened—anything at the last moment to prevent it ?"

At her words Joan's sick heart gives a great bound; and the foolish carnation colour rushes to her lily cheeks. Is it just possible ?—it is not likely—nothing is less likely—but still such things have happened ! As she so thinks, pushing away and yet involuntarily fostering the exquisite mad hope, the listeners' strained ears are suddenly smitten by a sharp and merry noise; and, in a moment, the whole air is full of the clangour of a resonant din : all the joy-bells from the three church towers shaking out their triumphant music—that, when most joyous, is yet sad—on the ready wind.

"It is all right !" cries Bell, in a tone of

rapturous relief, drawing a long breath; "I declare the suspense was beginning to make me feel quite hysterical!"

"It is a *faitaccomply!*" says Mrs. Moberley solemnly, making one long English word out of the two French ones; "Anthony is a married man!—not all the king's horses and all the king's men can set Humpty Dumpty up again! Why, Joan, though you kept so quiet, I believe you were as excited as any of us; why, child, you are as white as a sheet!"

"Am I not always white?" asks Joan, in a tone of angry and impatient agony, for indeed her cup is over full; "oh, Aunt Moberley, if you would but make up your mind that I am always white!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THUS Wolferstan is wed. The *Helmsley Courier* devotes three columns to the describing of his and his wife's deportment on the occasion; of how they were clad, who wed them, and who looked on. The *Morning Post*, the *Court Journal*, and half a dozen other papers have also each and all something to say on this subject; and all these notices Joan has to read aloud to her aunt, and does so read them, with an unfaltering voice, and, where it appears seemly and probable that she

should do so, makes comments on them. But the wedding is now deposed from its supremacy of interest. The past has ever few courtiers in comparison of the future. The honeymoon is drawing towards its close, and Joan is still at Portland Villa. Each day her hope of escaping before the dreaded epoch of Wolferstan's return has grown more sickly; now it is dead. She has heard his wedding bells. For days after they ceased pealing she heard them still. Sometimes she hears them now at the deadest hour of night deafening her ears. She has heard, and now fate wills that she shall also see.

The day finally decided upon for her departure is—oh, irony of destiny!—the one after that fixed for the bridepeople's return, and the fancy ball which is to grace it; instead of, as she had ardently prayed, the one before. Our eye speaks much more loudly and distinctly to us than does our ear. It seems to Joan that what she has already endured,

is as nothing compared with what she will suffer when seeing with bodily eyes that felicity of which she yet already knows.

The honeymoon nears its end; it is to be literally only a moon. The young people are to be allowed no margin; they are to be strictly tied down to their four weeks, at the end of which time they are to make their triumphant entry into their paternal home. They are to be dragged from the station by their tenants (oh, most triste and humiliating of compliments! the apprehension of which must, I think, deter many an eldest son from marrying, or, at least, from ever bringing home his bride). Flags are to wave for them, arches are to tower above them, parti-coloured poles to rise to their glory, and in the evening the abbey doors are to be thrown wide open to admit so great a crowd as even its wide rooms will scarce contain; a crowd embracing everything with the slenderest claims

to gentility in all the country round, and in Helmsley itself.

"A regular popularity affair," says Mrs. Moberley, with a slightly discontented accent. "A sort of thing that it is no kind of compliment to be asked to! everybody is asked—hightums, tightums, scrubs!"

"Scrubs, at all events, we will hope," says Diana, with a dry smile, "else our chance is but small."

It is nearing rapidly now. Every milliner and sempstress in Helmsley is working double tides; for this is no common ball, for which the purchase of a few yards of tulle or tarletane will fit you, but a fancy ball—rigorously fancy, to which you must come travestied, or not come at all. The problem which is employing the brains of all Helmsley—the maximum of magnificence and originality with the minimum of expense—is taxing the wits of the artless family at Portland Villa, perhaps more severely than any other in the country side.

In the case of Arabella, indeed, there is no difficulty. It has not taken her two seconds to decide upon the character she will personate. She will be a vivandière, and is already revelling, by anticipation, in the glories of her warlike jacket, pert cap, and little barrel. For one evening she may be almost mistaken for a soldier. Diana's heart has at first seriously leant towards a like costume, but out of this inclination Joan has succeeded in coaxing her.

"They do not admit uniforms!" says Micky, in a grumbling tone, as he sits sucking the top of his stick and staring into the fire. "A great mistake; a uniform goes everywhere."

"You can easily evade it by going as a boiled lobster," cries Diana, with levity, but Mr. Brand does not laugh.

"I thought of going as the Master of Ravenswood," he continues in a complaining tone; "a very effective dress, I am told;

but there is a rumour that Wolferstan himself has adopted it. It would not do to clash with the bridegroom, I suppose, so now I am at sea again."

"Shake hands, then," says Mrs. Moberley, holding out a plump hand across the hearth to him, "for so am I. We have all been racking our brains to find some character that will suit a stout figure. There must have been stout people in the world before me," (laughing)—"but we cannot, for the life of us, think of any."

"I shall be Mother Hubbard," cries Diana, gaily, sitting down on the hearthrug and drawing Mr. Brown towards her, Mr. Brown half asleep, and, consequently, rather short in the temper. "I shall be Mother Hubbard, and Mr. Brown shall be my dog! Do you hear, Joan? Mr. Brown is going to the fancy ball as Mother Hubbard's dog, so please make a suit of clothes for him at once."

"The Black Prince! the Douglas! Cœur

de Lion!" says Micky over in a monotonous undertone to himself, as his eye still tries to wrest some inspiration from the fire's heart. "I have a good mind to be Cœur de Lion—I do not think that there will be another—I shall be the only one."

"Why need you be a king or a bigwig of any kind?" asks Diana bluntly, still framing with her hands Mr. Brown's deeply unwilling face, and bringing his wrinkles into unnatural and monstrous prominence. "Why cannot you be something ridiculous? It would be so much more amusing! I always like the idea of the clergyman who went to a fancy ball in full canonicals with his curate after him as Beelzebub. You are not a curate, but why should not you be Beelzebub!"

But this suggestion finds no manner of favour in Mr. Brand's eyes.

* * * * *

Indecision is at an end now, at all events. Last stitches are being set, costumes trem-

blingly tried on and final alterations made—for the fateful day has come. The arches are complete to the last leaf—shining evergreen and varnished holly—they stride across street and road. The show school-child has been armed with her bouquet. The big cardboard "Welcomes!" and "Health and Happinesses!" have all been pasted on their red cloth, and set up over the lodge gates to give their staring greeting. The train by which the bridal couple are to arrive reaches Helmsley at two p.m. Long before that hour the Misses Moberley, under the escort of Micky, have set off for the town, so as to be in ample time to witness the expected entry.

From this ordeal Joan is saved by an unexpected stroke of luck. Fate, unkind so long, is kind at last, and sends her a heavy unmistakable cold—a cold about which there is no malingering, and in which the most sceptical cannot refuse to believe. Perhaps

she is not very much the gainer after all. She will not thereby escape the sight of Anthony, for does not the *cortège* pass the very gate of Portland Villa? and to refuse to look out at it, would be at once to confess that very secret which she has been guarding so long, so jealously, and with such infinite pains.

Mrs. Moberley and Joan remain behind, but though her daughters have gone and she has stayed, yet is Mrs. Moberley's excitement no whit inferior to theirs. She is up and down twenty times in a minute, from door to window, from window to door, and when the hour draws nigh at which the *cortège* may reasonably be expected to appear—she even goes a step further, and passes out into the road, where she stands, with hand shading her eyes, while the winter wind coldly frolics with her cap lappets—gazing eagerly at the turn of the road which is to give to view the desired equipage.

But gaze as she may, no such equipage

appears. The time goes by, and Mrs. Moberley's hopes decline through the several degrees of confident expectation and doubt, till, at last, they reach the nadir of despair.

"There must have been an accident?" she says, while her jovial round face pales and lengthens. "I declare I am quite upset—there must have been an accident to the train!"

Joan is trembling all over like a leaf. The strain all morning has been almost more than she can bear. The necessity for making light, cheerful, and interested answers to her aunt's foolish aud incessant questions and ejaculations has tried her strength to its very outside limit. By this time she can no longer manage her voice, and "I hope not! I hope not!" (in a very low key) is all she can say.

By and by the girls coming bustling in again, with faces reddened by exercise and triumph, brimming over with spirits and excitement, sufficiently prove that there has

been no catastrophe or *contretemps.* They are both talking at once, and at the very top of their voices; but Bell's, being the stronger organ, drowns and effaces her sister's weaker one.

"We had the best possible view!" she cries exultantly; "I could not have wished for a better; I was as close to them as I am to you; I could have put out my hand and touched the carriage; the town was so gay—you would not have known it—flags out of every window—quite like fairy-land!"

She stops for a moment, out of breath; but instantly resumes—afraid perhaps of Diana's usurping the speakership.

"The carriage came along High Street at a foot's pace, and there they were bowing right and left, quite like Royalty!"

"They indeed!" cries Diana ironically; "*she* was waggling her head like a mandarin, it is true; but *he*—he scarcely stirred except to take off his hat to one or two people that

he knew. He leaned back, looking as white as death, and with his hat pulled down over his eyes!"

"But why did not they come past here" inquires Mrs. Moberley, raising her voice, resolute to outscream her daughters, and have her question answered at any price: "they have never passed by us at all, have they, Joan? I never was so disappointed in my life! no more was Joan!"

Arabella shrugs her shoulders. "It was a whim of his! nobody could account for it; he would have them go to the West Lodge instead: it put the people out a good deal, as it is half a mile further out of the way; and of course, as they were not expected, there were no arches or anything there; but he would have it so! I cannot think what possessed him!"

"Dear me! how odd!" says Mrs. Moberley, in a tone of curious reflection; "I hope that there is nothing wrong about his head! I

hope he is not going like his father, poor old gentlemen!"

Joan has turned away to the window; her heart beating hard and quick. It is contracted by an agony of pain, that is yet tinged by a most bitter joy. He has at least enough feeling for her left to make him unwilling to display his new felicity, right under her aching eyes.

The evening has come now; the evening whose closing in has been so eagerly watched. The hour at which the Abbey doors are to be thrown open has arrived: the guests are flocking in. Already the road is full of carriages—carriages going—carriages returning. Gaily their red lamps shine through the black night. The Moberleys are in the very act of departure. For ten minutes Joan has been on her knees; putting in last stitches and important pins, and doing crowning acts of embellishment; whispering also hopes, and soothing misgivings where

there are any to be soothed. In Miss Moberley's case there are none. Fully equipped in scarlet jacket, gold lace and short petticoats, with her barrel on her back, and her cap set well on one side upon her large head, she is enjoying such a happy confidence that she is representing the character she has undertaken to personate with glory and fidelity, that no adverse criticisms —were any such forthcoming—could have power to move her from her blest complacence. But Diana, as Bo Peep, is revelling in no such resolute self-satisfaction. She has been unable to enact the part of Mother Hubbard after all; as, at the last moment, Mr. Brown refuses to appear before the world as Mother Hubbard's dog. She has therefore, at Joan's persuasion, chosen the part of Bo Peep instead.

At the present moment, Joan is standing beside her cousin, firmly fastening on her blonde head a dainty straw hat, cunningly

rose-wreathed; such a hat as Tradition has always connected with the memory of the lady who lost her sheep. Joan, indeed, is eying the whole of Bo Peep with something of a parent's or creator's pride; for is not the hat—are not the cherry-coloured petticoat and the flowered chintz sacque—the work of her own fingers and brains?

"There!" she cries in a voice of soft and kindly triumph, "I defy any Bo Peep to beat mine! Come and look at yourself, Di." She leads the shy pleased girl before the glass, and they stand side by side; with the eyes of both fixed upon Diana's image! the tall pale royal lily, and the little blushing hedge rose.

Joan has spoken truth. Any imposing or pretentious costume—*La Vallière*, Marquise, Marie Stuart—would have crushed Diana into insignificance; but, as little Bo Peep, with great shy eyes, with round pink velvet cheeks, dewy red lips, and a woolly lamb

that, on extreme pressure, gives utterance to real "Baas," under her arm, she is charming. As to the lamb, that spurious animal has filled the breasts of the dogs with feelings of alternate amazement, bitter indignation, and awe.

Mrs. Moberley has finally decided upon the character of the Queen of Sheba; a character which gives indeed an idea of vague magnificence, but ties one down to no minutiæ of detail. The Queen of Sheba was undoubtedly handsomely dressed; and it is also equally beyond doubt that at this distance of time it is impossible to reconstruct her costume with any attempt at accuracy. She *may* have worn a red velvet gown, something tight for her queenly charms, and a large blonde cap variously flowered, and whence a bird of Paradise plume—generously lent by Diana for the occasion—waves superb but irrelevant. She *may* and she may not. History is silent.

Micky Brand—he is to escort them, or "beau" them, as Mrs. Moberley words it—has kept to his last-expressed intention; and, five minutes ago, entered the room—no longer as Micky Brand of the 170th foot—but as the dauntless Plantagenet, Richard of the Lion Heart. A gilt and pasteboard crown, majestic but insecure, since it *will* veer to one side, binds his brows: enormous white cotton stockings case and define his stout limbs from ankle to waist: a regal mantle of cotton velvet drapes his person, and three large gold lions ramp mightily up his broad back.

They are off now; the Queen of Sheba, Cœur de Lion, vivandière, and Bo Peep. Joan has seen and heard the last of them; the last of Diana, driving the dogs to a final frenzy of wrathful curiosity, by making her lamb give one last improbable, unlamblike squeak; of Plantagenet, cursing and resettling his diadem, which he has inad-

vertently bumped against the fly roof; of the Queen of Sheba, screaming out some last forgotten directions, to keep the fire up, and not let the dogs get to the cold meat!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THEY are gone now; and Joan, having shut the door after them, re-enters the empty drawing-room, and, having stirred the fire from red repose into cheerful activity, stands leaning one elbow on the chimney-piece, and poising one foot on the warm fender. Her reflections begin with a laugh. She laughs out loud, at the recollection of the back view of *Cœur de Lion* arming the queen of Sheba down the narrow passage; and of the care with which he tucked his lions under him in the fly. She may laugh

as loud as she pleases, or weep, or shout, or whoop, or make any other vociferous noise for which she feels inclined; for there is not a single soul in the house to hear her. Beside the dogs, there is no living creature within the walls but herself. The servants are every one gone to see the ball. Joan has resolutely declined to stand in the way of the pleasure of any one of them, and has expressed her entire willingness to keep house for one night, alone.

After all, what danger is there? At the most favourable time Portland Villa does not give the idea of an abode that would very richly reward a burglarious attempt; and to-night of all nights, with the whole neighbourhood awake and astir—with the road full of carriages, voices, people, there is, if possible, less peril than ever. The hall door is locked and chained. The garden door, it is true, is neither; for the excellent reason that the lock, like most things at Portland Villa, is broken;

but who would think of choosing that mode of entry ?

Fear is certainly the last emotion that is in Miss Dering's thoughts, as, abandoning her standing posture, she sinks into Mrs. Moberley's arm-chair and plunges herself into reflection. The fire is warm and soothing, and the chair fairly comfortable; yet she feels no inclination for sleep. Her mind is too alert and astir. To-morrow opens a new chapter of her history : to-morrow she travels away to her new home. But the future engages her but little. There will be no pleasure in it; and it is useless to go prematurely to meet pain. Suffering there will undoubtedly be; but, if the same in degree, it will at least be different in kind from that which she has, of late, been enduring. At least this weary double life will be at an end; this outside cheerfulness and inward desolation, these outside smiles and inward tears. If her spirits droop now, none will ask why :

if she is silent, no one will offer her a penny for her thoughts; as has ever been the officious and tyrannical custom at Portland Villa.

But it is the past and the present that chiefly form the matter of her meditations; the past, over which now a steady glory of broad even sunshine seems to have settled down, though at the time many a travelling cloud darkened the landscape—many a shower wetted it; but now in her heart it is laid up all in pure gold. A past that seems to have been made up all of Anthony!—either of happily expecting Anthony; of joyfully holding him company, or of softly recollecting him. And the present? After all, the present binds us with stronger chains than do either his dead brother or his unborn one. Longer—far longer than did either the past or the future, the *now* holds her in its bitter clasp. After all, she might as well have gone to the ball; for, almost as plainly as if she were there, does she hear the merry band—the musicians

scraping, squeaking, twanging. Almost as distinctly as if she were whirling with them, does she see the incongruous gay crowd, whirling, flying, jostling, prancing, shambling, round; and above the lower throng she sees too her love's high head—that head that neither grief nor shame has ever bowed—held well aloft; she sees the flashing of his broad proud eye, and the good-humour of his sunshiny smile. She closes her eyes the better to see him.

The night is wearing on apace. A while ago the hospital clock's staid voice told the hour of one. It must be half an hour since she took the dogs to bed in the kitchen, since she saw them all turn an innumerable number of unnecessary times before finally snuggling comfortably, nose to tail, each in his separate basket. She has kissed each of their baggy black cheeks—Mr. Brown's last as being dearest—and has returned to the drawing-room.

As she passed the unshuttered passage window, she looked out. A mirk winter night, though it is mid February, and snowing hard! Poor coachmen! poor horses! The gas is out: nor is there any light in the drawing-room but what the fire gives; and it is not at a blazing active stage, but has sunk to a sleepy passive red rest. She is leaning forward now in her chair with hands spread towards the warmth, and eyes idly gazing at the odd little fire-hills, fire-valleys, fire-gulfs before her, when her ear is suddenly hit by a small but certain noise. The road outside is, for a while, almost as quiet as on an ordinary night; for all the guests have long arrived, and none have yet begun to depart. One grows very familiar with the noises of a house in which one has spent nine months; one can distinguish with nicety between the tones of voice of each bell, each door hinge, each door handle. Were it not so grossly improbable —were it mid-day instead of midnight, she

would say that that noise was made by the lifting of the latch of the garden door.

"It is impossible!" she says to herself chidingly; "who were ever known to sit by themselves at dead of night, without hearing some unexplained sound to set their nerves tingling?"

But all the same, her whole soul and life seem to have suddenly passed into her ears. And they have not deceived her. There is no mistake now; there is the undeniable sound of a step in the passage outside—a step, which on reaching the drawing-room door has paused. Outside that door there is an unknown unshaped something; and with that *something* she is *tête-à-tête*.

Too terrified to change her position by one hair's breadth, she sits; still holding her hands to the fire with wide eyes, tensely strained ears, and a heart that seems as if it would leap through her gown. As she so paralysedly sits the door opens softly—opens—opens—

(oh, if it would but open more quickly!)—and in the aperture appears, indistinctly seen, firelight-freaked and shadow-blurred, the figure of a tall man huddled in a cloak; the figure—and also the face! But whose face? Great God! is she awake? it is Wolferstan's! At first she has no other thought than that either it is one of those solid-seeming and vivid optical delusions which sometimes, even in broad daylight, have been known to mislead people of clear heads and sound wits, or that it is his wraith—his double, which she, by eager and continuous thinking of him, has evoked.

But as he advances farther into the room; as she hears his footsteps, substantial and real; as the fire giving one sudden upleap, as if it, too, were astonied, plays upon his face—she realises that it is indeed Anthony! But what, in Heaven's name, is he doing here? Has he lost his wits? And is this the brave gay bridegroom that she has been imaging—

this slouching man; with snow-flakes lying thickly on shoulders and hair; with miserable gray eyes sullen and sunk, and hollow pale cheeks—that is gazing at her with such a dumb fixity.

She has sprung to her feet, now that the spell of the unknown and the supernatural no longer binds her; and retreating a step or two, stands grasping convulsively the back of a chair to steady herself. In utter dumbness they stand staring at each other for a hundred pulse-beats.

Joan could not speak if you were to promise her a kingdom for each word! But, though she cannot speak, she stretches out her trembling right hand, and with a wordless gesture motions to the door, bidding him depart.

"What!" he says in a hoarse whisper; "you will not speak to me! you wave me silently away, as if I were a too importunate beggar!"

His words seem to give her back, in some degree, the power of speech.

"What is this?" she says in a low uncertain voice, full of horror and pain; "have you lost your wits? What brings you here?"

"What brings me here?" he repeats slowly, putting his hand to his head with a dazed gesture. "I—I—do not know!—I had no thought of coming! They told me that you were all alone here—all alone! but I did not mean to come! My only thought was to get away from the sound of those fiddles!—they were driving me mad as fast as they could! I am not mad now, though you look at me as if I were—I am as sane as you are. My only thought was to get away into the good cold outside air—and once there, my feet of their own accord, without my will, carried me along the old path they know so well—the old path, over the fields, through the garden by the sun-dial—and—and—I am here."

His words come slowly, draggingly, with

many a pause and gap between, as the words of one that speaks, scarce knowing what he says.

Again there is silence; and still they too stand gazing blankly across the red fire-glow into the agony of each other's eyes. After a while Anthony speaks in a vibrating rough voice:

"Joan!" he says; "you set up a barrier between us—an imaginary one that a breath could blow away!—and I—I have set up a real one, such as in all our lives neither you nor I will ever be able to overleap!"

She answers nothing. Before her blue eyes there has come a dimness. In her brain there is an odd noisy whirl and jumble. She hears his speech indeed, sounding strange and muffled, but she can give him back none.

"Do you ask why I did it?" he goes on in a distincter, louder tone. "You do not know why? Well then" (with a wild laugh), "we

are equal, for, as I live, neither do I! When you sent me away, why did I go?—why did I go?" (in a tone of the most poignant self-reproach). "I should have clung about your knees—I should have tormented you with my importunities—I should never have let you out of my arms—till I had wrung from you that 'yes,' that would have been the salvation of us both! Well, when you sent me away, I fell almost immediately into her company. The God above us knows that I did not seek it—that it was thrust upon me!—into her familiar intimate society! You know the old story; you know the sort of power that she always had over me—the domination over all that is base in me—Heaven knows there is enough!—before I well knew it I had drifted into *this!*" (his voice sinking to a whisper of angry despair, while he brings his clenched hand heavily down on the table). "Honour, that is godfather to half the dishonourable actions in

the world, had manacled me for life; had made a liar and a traitor of me!" He has thrown himself into a chair, and, flinging his arms down upon the table, has sunk his head upon them—the sunshiny brown head that a few minutes ago she had been picturing to herself as held so gaily and proudly aloft. After a while he looks up again. "Joan!" he says, with a sort of hard dry sob in his voice; "Joan, tell me at least—I think I shall bear my life better if you will—tell me that at any rate you would never have relented—that if I had waited, waited, waited for years you would always have held out against me! If you have one grain of mercy in you, tell me that you would always have been obdurate!—whether it is true or false tell me so."

Still she is silent. The dimness is, indeed, clearing away from before her eyes, and objects begin to reassume their true tints and steady shapes, but her throat still feels

choked, and her lips, though they move, give out no articulate sound.

"What! not a word?" he says hoarsely. "Joan—*my* Joan that was—that *is*—that *is*—God help me! that always will be! Have not you one sweet word for me? you that had so many! Sweet or bitter, give me one! do not murder me with this silence!"

Then at length with immeasurable difficulty she speaks.

"I have one word for you—only one—*go!* I have no other!"

"I will not go!" he cries insanely. "What security have I that, after to-night, I shall ever look upon your face again? With your goodwill I know I never shall; if there is any corner of the earth in which you can hide yourself from me you will. Do not I know you well enough for that? They tell me that you are going away into a new slavery to-morrow. Joan—poor Joan! are you always—*always* to be a slave?"

He has risen to his feet again. Scalding tears are in his eyes; and his face, young, straight-featured, and comely as it is, looks old and gray and unsightly. He has advanced nearer to her, and in his madness is stretching out his arms towards her. She does not fly or shrink from him. On the contrary, she makes two steps towards him. Her feet feel unsteady and insecure, as though they could scarce upbear the weight of her light body, but yet she steps towards him, and as she so steps, his arms drop to his sides. There is that in her eye and her look which makes his frenzy quail and die.

"Anthony," she says, laying her cold small hand on his coat-sleeve, and speaking in a voice that though very low, does not tremble, "is this the love that was to raise you to my level? This, that after having forgotten me in a month, now tries to do me the one last injury in its power, by blasting my good name?" Under her light touch, under the command

of her pure eyes, he stands as if turned to stone. He neither stirs nor speaks. "Go," she says, pointing with pale austerity to the door, "at once—this moment—and I will ask God to wipe this half-hour clean out of my memory; of His clemency to let me forget that the man I thought such a stainless gentleman could be for one hour a coward and a traitor!" Under her words he starts and winces as if one had touched him with a hot iron, but still her eyes keep him dumb. "What speech can there be any more between us two in this world?" she goes on in the same steadfast low key; "whether we are together in this narrow room, or whether all the great earth spreads between us, we are equally for ever—for ever asunder. What is there left for us to do but to fight out our lives bravely and truly apart? Perhaps" (faltering a little)—"perhaps when the fight is over—when this world is done with and put by; when the next——"

"And if there is no next," he says heavily, breaking into her speech, "all the analogies of nature—all the later secrets she has given up, point one way! they all say, 'There is no other! for you there is no other! make the most of this!'"

"And if there is no other," she cries brokenly, lifting her clasped hands and streaming eyes, "perhaps it is so. I know not! it is all thick blackness round me! but if there *is* no other—if this narrow bridge of life is all the space that we are given in which to tread down the brute within us, to take the satyr by the throat and lift up the God! then all the more — a hundred times the more—have we no time to lose! let us begin at once — at once!" Her voice, so tremulous and shaken at first, has grown clear and strong, and into her eyes there has come a bright and saintly shining. "Go!" she says, still pointing with slight lifted arm to the door, which is to shut him for ever

from her sight; "you have made me a very sorrowful woman; you have made the taste of life bitter to me; do not add this crowning grief—this sorrow for which there is no physic—the sorrow of thinking that I, whose one wish, as God lives, was to raise you to the better life—to make you worthier and nobler—that I should be made the tool with which you work your degradation! Go!"

And without another word he goes.

END OF PART I.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE world — the old world or the young world—whichever way you choose to look at it, is nine hundred and twelve days older than it was. It is two years and a half since we bade good-bye to Joan. Since then there have been three sets of east winds and daffodils; three of roses and hay-cocks; two of flame-coloured woods, and Michaelmas geese; and two of snow-feathers and iron frosts. The world has swung along at its old jog trot. Great people have died in small numbers, and small people in great

numbers. People have been, wed, unwed, half-wed. Tears have flowed, whose united volume would make a river that would outswell the Mississippi; and laughs have echoed whose combined noise would drown the sound of man's loudest cannon, or God's best thunderstorm. And Joan Dering is still alive. She has contributed a few of the tears to the great river, and a few of the laughs to the great noise.

When we left her it was February, when we find her again it is August. When we left her it was dark: when we find her it is light. When we left her it was night: when we find her it is day. An August day in the afternoon. But there is no sultry August sun-blaze. The whole air is occupied by a fine, small rain, soft as butter, thick as mist, that, while it seems to caress you, soaks you to the skin. And so, though it is a half-holiday, the Smith Deloraine schoolroom is as inhabited as if it were mid-lesson time.

By the open window, almost reached by the rain plash, sits a little boy with heavy volume supported on small crossed knees, bent head and hair falling into his studious eyes; evidently buried, full five fathom deep, in the quarto page before him. Another boy, a size larger, and apparently of a bent less intellectual than practical, has stealthily climbed upon a chair; and, by the aid of a grammar and a door ajar, is cautiously arranging a booby trap for the reception of his sister Faustine, who left the room about ten minutes ago, and may shortly be expected to return.

Did his instructress see him she would undoubtedly put a stop to his exertions; but, as it happens, her back is turned towards him; and moreover, for the moment, her thoughts are far enough from little boys. She is sitting at the table with brown head leant on white hand, while before her lies open an old pocket-book, at one entry in which her blue eyes are fixedly staring. For the moment she sees

neither pupils, nor green baize, nor small rain, nor big maps.

Her meditations are broken in upon by the voice of the little student, who suddenly lifts up his stooped head, his intently wrinkled forehead, and his little shrill voice.

"Miss Dering, why was not Queen Caroline a good woman? what did she do? did she cut off people's heads?"

"Not that I ever heard of, Monty!" replies Joan, laughing a little, and evading an explanation of the nature of the iniquities perpetrated by George the Fourth's consort.

Again there is silence; broken this time by the opening of the door (innocuously, for the booby trap has missed fire), to admit a little girl, Joan's eldest and last disciple—a well-to-do pink miss of ten.

"Miss Dering, mamma sends her love to you, and will you mind dining with them to-night?—they will be thirteen if you do not. Why do they mind being thirteen? I asked

mamma, and she said it was because of Judas Iscariot!—what has Judas Iscariot to say to it?"

"Going to dine!" cries Rupert, with a long-drawn sigh of bitter envy; "how I wish I was going to dine! what a lot I'd eat! I'd have twice of everything!"

"What will you wear, Miss Dering?" asks Faustine gravely; "but you have so few dresses!—do not you wish that you had as many as mamma? Mills says that mamma might go on for a month without stopping, putting on two fresh dresses every day!"

Joan smiles good-humouredly.

"If I had a hundred, I could not wear more than one at a time, could I?"

"Papa and mamma quarrelled this morning!" says Rupert triumphantly, in the tone of a discoverer; "they often quarrel! Do husbands and wives always quarrel, Miss Dering?"

"If you had a husband do you think that

you would quarrel with him?" asks Faustine, leaning her elbows on the table, and shaking her flax fleece.

"I wonder will you ever have a husband?" asks Rupert, staring affectionately with round unblinking eyes into Joan's face, as if to gauge her probabilities of being wed.

She laughs a little.

"I think it is extremely unlikely."

"We will watch you as you go in to dinner, from the stairs," says Faustine; "the maids always do; you will come last of all, will not you?"

"Yes, last of all."

"Miss Dering," cries Monty, looking up again from his book with flushed cheeks and excited shining eyes, in utter unconsciousness of there having been any intervening conversation between his last query and his present one; "would not she say her prayers?"

"Would not who?" asks Joan, who has forgotten the Majesty of Brunswick.

"I never heard of anybody but old Daddy Longlegs that would not."

The door again opens, and a tall pale lady, with a pretty fresh gown and a pretty faded face, chronically discontent, trails slowly in.

"Has Faustine asked you?" she says, advancing to the table. "I thought I would make sure by coming myself; children never give messages correctly."

"You wish me to dine?" says Joan, in a pleasant ready voice. "I shall be very glad."

"We shall be thirteen if you do not;" says the other in a depressed tone. "Mr. Smith Deloraine has invited a cousin of his at the last moment; so the whole party is disarranged, and the table has to be laid again."

"Yes?"

"His name is Smith" (in a voice of languid disapprobation). "I have only seen him once! he is a little horror—a Yahoo—

and I am afraid that I shall have to send you in with him; but you need not speak to him; he is beyond the pale of conversation, and is so overwhelmed with *mauvaise honte*, that it is a barbarity to address him!"

"Then I may enjoy my dinner in peace," says Joan, laughing, "which is better than any conversation, is not it, Rupert?"

"By the by you ought to know him" (with a slight quickening of speech and animation of look); "he is the man who bought Dering!"

"The man who bought Dering!" repeats Joan, starting, while a painful hot flush runs hastily to her cheeks. "Oh!—and—" (with an accent of unavoidable repugnance)—"and I must go in to dinner with him?" Then, in a moment, recovering herself: "I am talking nonsense! Of course I—I—have no objection!—I—I—do not mind."

"It is very disgusting! I quite agree with you," says Mrs. Smith Deloraine, putting her

head on one side and speaking in a very piano tone, while she felicitously ignores the fact, that not so very long ago the Smith Deloraines' family tree rose triumphant from Magenta dye—"the way in which all the old historic places are falling into the hands of these tinkers and tailors *is* very disgusting. But *que voulez-vous?* here they are! and we must make the best of them."

"Every dog has his day, I suppose," rejoins Joan, trying to smile, and to wink away the two large tears that have rushed to her eyes; "but the ex-dogs feel a little bitterly towards the reigning ones!"

"Naturally. Dear me!" (sighing heavily) "how it rains! Life is very uphill on these kind of days!" and so trails depressedly away again, still sighing and lamenting that the table has to be fresh laid.

When she is gone Joan sinks back again deeper than ever into her reflections. Her eyes wander away through the window and

the Scotch mist to the wet horizon, in the direction where twelve miles away she knows that the walls of Dering Castle are grayly rising. Her ears take no note of the little persistent child voices round her, nor of the fire of reiterated eager questions to which they are exposed.

"What is a Yahoo, Miss Dering?"

"Is papa a Yahoo?"

"Of course, if his cousin is, he is."

"Is mamma a Yahoo?"

"Are you a Yahoo?"

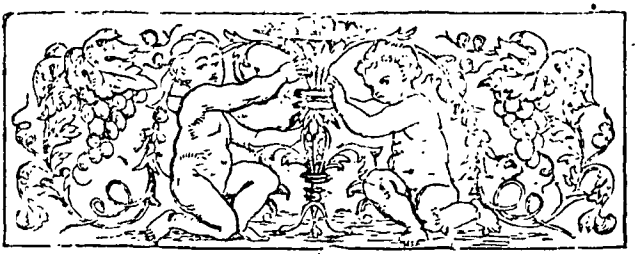
"Are we Yahoos?"

"Are Yahoos pretty?"

By and by she is rid of the children too.

They go off to a distant unfurnished room, where—there being nothing to break—nothing but high ceiling, unpapered walls, and bare floor, they are allowed to vent their ebullient spirits in a safe vacancy. They carry off even the reluctant Montacute, who would far rather have remained behind, with his

quarto, to investigate still further the ill-doings of Caroline of Brunswick; but in vain. He is swept away by his boisterous brother and sister.



CHAPTER II.

JOAN is dressed to the last pin and button. She has taken her farewell look at her own image—that look of temperate approval which a very pretty woman must, in common honesty, award to her own reflection. She would admire such a face were it on any one else's body. Why not because it is on her own? Joan knows quite as well as you could tell her that she is pretty; but it is such an old piece of news that it brings no great elation or complacency with it. As long as she can

remember, she has always been pretty, and people have told her so. It is not they whose beauty has grown up with them from babyhood to whom it is a perilous gift; it is those who have jumped from an ugly unpromising girlhood into a handsome womanhood, whose heads are mostly turned by their own charms.

Joan is dressed in black. She usually is. It is economic and unremarkable, and all colours go with it. Her gown is a veteran —a scarred and war-worn veteran; one of her original Dering stock; one of those which the Misses Moberley copied in cheap materials and gaudy colours, and garbled in the copying. It has been modified so as to tally fairly with the new mode; and having been originally of the best French cut, and the richest, softest Lyons silk, it is still even in its decline eminently respectable. A little kerchief of cobweb muslin and ancient yellowy lace—also a relic of her gone prosperity, for

she is hardly likely to buy old Flemish point nowadays—is

"Over her decent shoulders drawn."

In her charming head, sleek and smooth as a robin's, there is no ornament but a little careless bunch of field poppies, bluettes, and ripe corn, that the children brought her, and which she wears rather to avoid hurting their feelings than from any more personal motive. She is quite ready now, and has re-entered the schoolroom.

"You have been only twenty minutes dressing!" cries Faustine, looking from the clock to Joan, with round astonished eyes; "Mamma never takes less than an hour!"

"Mind you come and see us when we are in bed," says Rupert impressively, "and tell us how many things you had for dinner!"

"You have only three buttons on your gloves!" says Faustine, taking hold of one of them, and eying it with a rather contemp-

tuous look; "Mamma has six; when I am a grown-up lady I mean to have twelve!"

Joan is in the drawing-room now. She has run rather hastily downstairs, under the impression that she is late; but on entering she finds that only ten people besides herself are yet assembled—that three must therefore be still missing. The host and hostess are both standing on the Persian hearthrug, though no fire lures them thither. Mrs. Smith Deloraine is a good head taller than her husband. That there may be no mistake about it, she is fond of standing beside him, and drawing up her slight tall figure to its last inch, so as to display to the world this advantage. Mr. Smith Deloraine is indeed neither so long nor so smart as his name.

Almost every trade and profession writes its name more or less plainly on its votaries; but none does this so distinctly as commerce. Commerce is written all over Mr. Smith Deloraine, from head to heel. He *could not*

be a soldier, a sailor, a lawyer, or a clergyman. Mr. Smith Deloraine gives you the impression that, if he let himself go—if he got drunk or jocular—if he flew into a rage or made love, he would be uncommonly vulgar; but by judiciously avoiding powerful emotions and colloquial expressions, he does very nicely.

As Joan enters, his wife is saying fretfully, "I am sure I do not know how much longer we are going to wait for *Mr. Smith Deloraine's* cousin: no one should be allowed more than ten minutes' law! it is not fair upon one's cook!"

"But, my love," suggests the host, with the deferential air of a man who has married above him, and never, even in sleep, forgets the liberty he has taken, "you forget that it is not only my cousin that has played truant — that we have not yet had the pleasure of welcoming your own relatives!"

His love looks full at him, or rather at the

place on which he is standing, without apparently being able to see him; nor does she vouchsafe him the very least answer, beyond stretching out her hand to the bell to ring for dinner.

"Oh, Miss Dering!" she cries, catching sight of Joan, "is not it unfortunate? I have just had a telegram from my cousin to say that she and her husband have missed their train and cannot be here till ten! I am so vexed! but" (sighing heavily) "it has been a day of *contretemps!*"

It is Joan's first intimation that her employer expected any cousins; but she expresses the proper regrets. Five minutes later, they are all marching in to dinner; Joan bringing up the rear, in composed solitude. As she crosses the hall, she looks upwards to send nods and becks up to the children, who, in company with half a dozen lady's-maids appraising the smart gowns, are hanging over the banisters.

Joan's position at the dinner-table is between the master of the house and a vacant place; not a promising situation for conversational enjoyment; but Joan has no great wish to converse. Her one desire is that the empty seat should remain empty throughout dinner. Not all her self-schooling, her philosophy, her common sense, or her Christian charity, have succeeded in making her feel that she can give anything more than the nakedest skeleton of civility to Dering's new lord. Can the ex-king willingly hob-a-nob with the reigning one? She has already made a vivid picture of him in her mind; the triumphant plutocrat; probably large and heavily jewelled; with florid shirt-front, and boastful familiar manners. Every five minutes which find him still absent are so much clear gain. It is true that Joan's own dinner prospect is not very lively; but that is a minor evil. She translates and commits to memory the whole

of the *menu*, for Rupert's benefit. She takes quiet note of her fellow-guests, and, being healthily hungry, enjoys her food.

Soup is safely passed and the party is in mid-fish when Joan's careless eyes are caught and fettered by the sight of a little young gentleman with a red head, and a small face on which freckles and fright strive for mastery; who is tendering stuttered apologies to the hostess, and having them received in a manner which would make a stouter heart than his quail, a wiser face than his look foolish. Is this the triumphant plutocrat—this unhappy little lad, bathed in scarlet discomfiture from top to toe, who is beginning aimlessly to ramble round the dinner-table; not seeing in his confusion that a kind-hearted footman is trying to guide him to his destined seat?

He is deposited in it at last, and, in a small and shaking voice, refuses the soup that has been recalled for him. Joan's animosity dies

on the spot—replaced by an immense surprise, and a hardly inferior compassion. It would be barbarity to address him now, but by and by, when he is cooled, fed, and calmed, it will, perhaps, be an act of Christian charity to make some small soothing observation to him.

For a full quarter of an hour, therefore, she leaves him entirely alone ; then, when the last *entrée* is setting out on its travels, she turns her charming kind face towards him, and, in a low pleasant voice that would not frighten a mouse or a hare, speaks :

" You mistook the dinner-hour, I daresay ? It has happened to me once or twice in my life !"

On perceiving that he is addressed, the flamingo hue again rushes over the little young gentleman, far as the eye can reach. Not daring to look her in the face, he shoots a timorous glance out of the corner of his right eye, from amid a forest of white eyelashes, and says in a hurried low voice :

"The clocks were different; ought not I to have come in? Did it matter much?".

Joan smiles involuntarily.

"Not in the least! Why should it? Did you drive over—drive yourself?"

"Oh, dear no!" in the same quick, nervous voice. "I never drive, I do not know much about horses; I came in a fly!"

A pause.

"Were you ever here before?" asks Joan, perceiving that the conversation, if kept up at all, must be supported catechism fashion—question and answer—and being perversely resolved not to let her little victim relapse again into silence.

"No, never!" looking timidly round the table. "I know nobody, I am quite a stranger in these parts."

"And yet you belong to this neighbourhood?" says Joan interrogatively. She cannot bring herself to ask more directly after her beloved, desecrated home, and yet

has a morbid longing to have it brought into the conversation.

"I suppose so," in a not very exhilarated tone. "I have lately purchased a place about twelve miles away—a very large place" (sighing); "perhaps you may have heard of it—Dering Castle!"

"Certainly I have heard of it," she answers, with a smile of exceeding sadness; "not only so, but I used once to live there!"

"Indeed!" (curiosity, for the moment, getting the better of *mauvaise honte*, and turning upon her for the first time a small, full face, quite as insignificant and rather more foolish than its profile).

"My name is Dering," she says in a very low voice. "I used to live there with my grandfather."

"Oh, really!" (in a tone of, if possible, increased awe). "You are a member of the late family—I had no idea!" A moment later, in a hesitating tone: "Were you—were you—much attached to the place?"

"I loved it!" she answers; her fair breast heaving under its dainty kerchief, and her blue eyes growing moist. "It would be a wonder if I did not. I spent twenty most happy years there."

"Oh, indeed!" Then, in a rather dubious voice: "It is a very fine place, of course—very fine—one of the show places of the county, I am told—and it has always been thrown open to the public every Friday, I hear. A very fine place for a numerous family, but do not you think that it is rather —rather large for one person?"

"Rather large!" echoes Joan indignantly. "Surely that is a good fault in a castle!"

"The rooms are so very spacious," continues their owner nervously; "and there are so many of them that, though I have occupied it now for three months, I can scarcely find my way about yet. I have never been used to a large house."

"No?"

There is a silence. Joan can't speak for anger and pain at the thought of this trumpery stripling walking, sole master, about the dear old halls and rich dusk chambers and reviling them in his little caitiff heart for their nobility. Her companion is far from guessing at her emotion. He knows only that she is listening to him with interested attention; that her voice is soft and civil, and her face lovely and kind, and that he himself is not nearly so much frightened as he was. He, indeed, is the first to renew the conversation.

"Perhaps" (in a hesitating voice, and growing pink again), "perhaps, if you were so fond of the Castle, you might like to run over some day and see the improvements."

"Improvements!" cries Joan hastily, coming out of her disagreeable reverie. "What improvements?" Then, recollecting herself, and in a calmer voice: "Have you then been making many improvements?"

"There is a great deal of new furniture introduced," says the young man, with a faint flash of pleasure in his pale eyes. "I suppose that the Castle had not been refurnished for many years. I am no judge myself of such matters, so I was advised to put it into the hands of a local upholsterer."

"A great deal of new furniture!" repeats Joan, drawing a long breath. "Yes!—and what else?"

"All the old tapestry has been removed," continues Mr. Smith, growing almost fluent under the fostering influence of his companion's attention and evident approbation. "It was so faded, dingy, and out of repair; it has been replaced by white and gold and mirrors in the French taste!"

"White and gold and mirrors in the French taste!" repeats Joan mechanically. "Yes—and what else?"

"All the windows throughout the building have been turned into sash ones, the best

plate glass instead of the old casements. No expense has been spared. I think" (with a nervous smile) "that you will say I have not been idle."

"I am sure I shall!" she answers in a very low voice, bending down her head. Her white hands are clenched together in her lap, her face has grown pale, and her lips are pinched. Why, oh why, did she ask these questions? Why did not she remain in her old blest ignorance? Why did not she leave undisturbed in her memory the old oak panels, the harmonious dim tapestry hues, the casements opening on roses and ivy?

It is well for Joan, and perhaps also for her neighbour, though he does not think so, that at this moment Mrs. Smith Deloraine begins to gather up her loose baggage, and beckons away the ladies. Joan rises hastily. Never—never has she left a table, or a table companion, with greater readiness. As they pass through the hall Mrs. Smith Deloraine

lays her hand affectionately on Joan's shoulder.

"Thank you so much!" she says lackadaisically; "how good you were!—you drew him out wonderfully!"

"Did I?" says Joan, with a gasp and a hysterical laugh; "then I wish I had not!"

"He is a little horror!" rejoins the other, in a disgusted tone; "did not I tell you so? he has been nowhere and knows no one, and he has white eyelashes; but" (shaking her head), "for all that, he is an enormous *parti!*"

"I suppose so!" replies Joan slowly; "he does not give one that impression!"

"He is a little beggar on horseback!" cries her companion, with more energy than one could have supposed her discontented soft voice capable of; "about a year ago he came quite unexpectedly into this colossal fortune; and now that he has it, he knows no more what

to do with it than that fire-shovel; it makes one sick!"

Joan is silent; though certainly not from any disagreement with the sentiment expressed. Her heart is too full to speak. She sits down and begins to talk to one of the ladies about her work; but to all her gentle womanly chat, there is, in her mind, a drear background of torn ivy, rent tapestry, sash windows.

The evening wears away. Coffee is past; the men reappear. Joan's new *protégé*, on first entering the room, has aimed at her a piteous, shipwrecked look, but seeing her palisadoed round by women, his heart fails him; and he remains planted on the hearth-rug—the spot whither he had first drifted. The other men have dispersed about the room; have thrown themselves into easy chairs; have engaged in talk. He alone still stands; afraid to sit down, afraid to stir, afraid to speak to any one; with his trembling

hands folded behind his coat tails for want of knowing where else to put them; while now and again waves of red misery rush over his whole body, as often as he thinks that any one is looking at him.

There he stands, a wretched little Crusoe, on his desert island of hearthrug. Joan looks at him, and smiles maliciously. It is the first time in her life that the suffering of a fellow creature has moved her to mirth. Were the case any other, she would rush helter-skelter, pell-mell to the rescue. But towards him her heart is hardened. No punishment can be too heavy for him who has mutilated the dear and reverend face of her ancient home, and set its valuable body masquerading in tawdry modern frippery: no punishment—not even that of standing, a forlorn, unrescued, social Crusoe, without man Friday, umbrella, or parrot.

It is ten o'clock now, and past; and the hostess's expected cousins are over-due. She

has observed several times that they will be hungry—that they will be tired—that she wishes they would come; and has succeeded in awakening a feeling of faint expectancy in the breasts of the company generally, when, at length, the listened-for carriage wheels are heard crunching the gravel of the drive; the hall-door bell is rung; no dogs rush out (for, alas! it is a house unblessed by dog presences); servants hasten to answer the summons, and Mrs. Smith Deloraine herself hurries out, leaving the door open behind her. There is a lull in the talk among those who are left behind: all, however little addicted to eavesdropping, involuntarily listening. Listening to the sound of cheerful mixed voices that has risen in the adjoining hall; voices welcoming —voices being welcomed—voices questioning, replying, ejaculating. At first they all talk at once, and you can detect no separate tones; but after a moment or two a strange woman's voice, clear, *enjouée*, rather loud, raises itself above the others.

A strange woman's!—strange she may be to the rest of the party, but is she strange to Joan? As those tones first strike her ear, her little deer-head, slightly stooped over her work, suddenly lifts itself; the hands, moving a minute ago so deft and white among her crewels, fall suddenly idle in her lap. Her eyes turn, wide and startled, towards the door. Quick short breaths draw in and again puff out her fine nostrils. Can there be two voices in the world so miraculously alike? Can there be such a wondrous sameness in the trick of two people's laughter? Oh, if they would but come in! There is no doubt but that the first glimpse of the new comer will disperse this painful mad illusion!—will make her racing heart pulse with reasonable slowness again. How they dawdle! How long they are! And yet they are not long really! It is scarcely five minutes from the moment when the hall-door bell rang to that at which they enter the drawing-room. Mrs.

Smith Deloraine leading her gaily chattering cousin, and the men (for Mr. Smith Deloraine has sped solicitously out in his wife's wake) following behind them.

Before they are well over the threshold Joan's eyes have fastened upon and taken possession of the entering forms. What new trick of fate is this? There is no need for a second look. The first one, darted lightning quick, has assured her, past the possibility of error, that the new comer's face and figure are not less familiar to her than were her voice and her laugh; and that face, figure, voice, laugh, belong to none other than to Lalage Wolferstan. And if the woman be Lalage, who then is this handsome dusty man that is stepping after her, making polite short answers to his new host's volleyed civilities? Who is he likely to be? Who but her husband? Who but Anthony?

CHAPTER III.

"HOW you dazzle one!" cries Lalage, advancing into the room; blinking her eyes unused after her long dark drive to the light; "how bright you are!—is there any one here that I know, I wonder?—I hope, if there is, that they will come and claim acquaintance with me, for I can see nothing!" Then, as her sight suddenly recovers its wonted strength and clearness, she turns her quick bold eyes round the room. In a moment they have lit upon Joan. "Miss Dering!—is it Miss

Dering?—how very absurd! Anthony, here is Miss Dering!—you do not mean to say that you do not remember Miss Dering!"

There comes no answer of any kind; at least in words. What answer is written on his face Joan can but dimly conjecture, for her eyes refuse to lift themselves to his. She puts out a small and icy hand in the direction where she feels that he is, and is aware that it is taken for a second into one as cold; then instantly dropped.

One thing is certain; and that is that her fingers cannot be in greater haste to get away from his than his are to get away from hers.

"How small the world is!" cries Lalage lightly; then quickly turning, in answer to an inquiry from her hostess, to a subject that is much nearer her heart. "Famished, my dear? of course we are! do not we look it? You have kept some dinner for us, I hope—yes?—that is right! and how soon do you

think it will be ready? do beg them to make haste!"

"Certainly!" (sweeping hospitably towards the bell in one of the fifty-six long-tailed gowns of which her daughter has made exultant mention); "but surely you will like to take off your bonnet first."

"And remove a few of my layers of dust," says Lalage, laughing, and passing a fine but dusty handkerchief over her handsome dusty cheek; "perhaps it would be more civilised!" (beginning to move towards the door, then, her eye suddenly alighting again upon Joan) —"Oh, Miss Dering, I remember your good-nature of old, and you have not been travelling for sixteen hours; do run into the outer hall and see if I have left my hand-bag there!"

"Why will you trouble other people with your errands?" interrupts a vexed man's voice, in a tone of deep though smothered irritation; "you know that I am always ready to go on your messages! what is it you want?"

Joan has come forward readily, though with knocking knees and an ash-white face, to perform the service asked of her; but at the sound of those tones, so well-known and yet so unknown (for where is the boyish jollity, the catching mirth, that always used to echo in the old Anthony's voice?) she shrinks back again into her corner, cowers away as if to get out of sight and ear-shot.

She takes up her needle again; but her shaking fingers are unable to guide it. It is impossible to her to set one stitch. But though she is incapable of working really, an apparent absorption in her occupation will make her less likely to be addressed. They have left the room now, and she breathes more freely; Lalage still laughing, and talking emphatically and rather loudly about her own hunger, and Anthony dead—*dead* silent. It is some time before they return; not until after the longed for and so eagerly asked

after dinner has been done justice to. In the meantime, Joan remains in the corner of the old-fashioned sofa behind the work-table; the same spot where she was when the tones of Lalage's remembered voice first smote her like a sword. Her head is down, bent over her work; all the pretty tools of her trade are spread around her. She has all the air of a persistent industry, and yet is, in effect, absolutely idle. About her goes on the hum of light talk, utterly unheard; a wave that flows round her without reaching or touching her. After a while she becomes aware that the ill-starred millionaire is seated along side of her.

She has no smallest idea of how he came there; nor is aware that she herself by a kind but quite unconscious smile, authorised him in the audacity of squeezing himself into the distant opposite sofa corner. There he now sits; having, in utter nervousness, built up a barrier of two fat cushions and a bolster

between them. He has recovered the power of speech, and is employing it to tell her many new and monstrous facts about his improvements; facts, which at any other time would make her soft hair stand upright on her head, but which now she does not even hear. She has indeed all the appearance of giving, by small and friendly nods here and there, assent and approbation to each fresh record of atrocity.

By and by the fed guests return; or rather, one of them does, the other does not at all reappear; one of them, escorted by the hostess, who has been doing them the doubtful kindness of bearing them company and watching them while they ate.

"At what time do they go to bed here?" asks Lalage, throwing herself into an easy chair at Joan's elbow, and looking yawningly at the clock; "early I trust? I hope they do not keep one up playing any horrid games; I hate a house where they play games!" then,

without giving time for a reply, she goes on, her quick cool look running over Joan's *tout ensemble.* "How very little changed you are! what a good digestion you must have! Do you see much alteration in me?"

Joan has lifted her eyes to her companion's face; from it they slowly travel to her figure, then back again; but slowly as her eyes travel, her answer comes more slowly still. To such a question it must needs be a lagging one. Alteration! ay, that she does. Such alteration as makes us peer nervously into our own glasses, when we meet an old friend after an interval of years. Bulk increased; delicacy decreased. A figure that has out-run, overflowed the once bounds of its voluptuous symmetry. A chin that has handsomely kept its early promise of doubling itself; carnations and lilies once so finely distinct and separate, now running into and marring each other. A universal blurring of outline, coarsening of tint, shipwreck of grace.

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"An embarrassing question!" says Lalage, looking keenly in the girl's confused face, and with a short laugh—"you cannot deny that you do; well, I should not have believed you if you had; I have worn infamously! it will soon be matter of history that I was once good-looking!" Joan is distressedly silent. To such a remark what reply is possible? "I have increased in weight three stone in the last two years," continues Lalage, looking at her own still soft and once shapely hand with an air of impartial disapprobation; "of course that is not healthy or natural at my age; the doctors tell me I should be all right again if I would walk five miles a day, and get up at six o'clock, and live on roast mutton and gruel."

"And do not you?" (in a tone of extreme surprise).

"Hardly!" (with a shrug). "I would not do any of the three if it would ensure my holding out to eighty!—why should I? if I

prefer to live thirty years comfortably, with unlimited tea and sleep, and unrestricted bonbons and *entremets*, to dragging out a dwindled existence to one hundred, on toast and water and captain's biscuits, surely that is my look-out!"

"Undoubtedly!" says Joan dryly.

"I have never thought a woman's life much worth having after thirty!" pursues Lalage, with a careless gravity; "or, in the case of an Englishwoman we will perhaps say five and thirty; by five and thirty the best of us has pretty well come to the end of her tether! —to lose one's looks, and be dieted too—bah!"—(with a reckless accent)—"it would be simpler to be dead at once!" Joan shudders a little, but does not answer. "They tell me I am killing myself!" continues her companion indifferently; "Anthony is always saying so! I tell him" (with a dry laugh), "that the wish is father to the thought!" A moment later, in a tone of much

greater interest and animation: "Courage! my ostentatious yawns have at last caught my cousin's eye; I do believe we are going to bed!"

CHAPTER IV.

USUALLY Joan is a deep sleeper. Very seldom is her pretty head vexed by one of those flighty purposeless visitors that we call dreams. Generally she lies all night quite still, scarcely changing once her quiet posture. Very often the housemaid who comes to call her finds her with the curly lashes of her closed eyes sweeping her cheeks.

> "For she, belike, had drunken deep
> Of all the blessedness of sleep!"

But to-night she does but sparely sip that

lovely draught. In wretched tossings and tumblings the lengthy hours crawl away; they that mostly pass like a pleasant flash. She lies on her right side. That is unbearable. She lies on the left. That is worse. Her cheeks are like live coals. They have lent their fever to the pillow, which has, for the whole night, lost the cool freshness that it had when first she laid her face upon it. Her hair cleaves damply to her forehead. Loud pulses seem ticking and hammering inside her head. The window is open, and the blind down. It keeps tapping against the sill with a teasing noise. She rises and draws it up.

A tall Lombardy poplar is lifting its high head against the sky, and the thin lawny clouds are racing away behind it. She stands with head leant against the window-frame and lips apart. It is easier to breathe here. The night air is cool and plentiful, and comes in with a willing soft rush. No angry blood can

long keep up its painful high temperature under this strong fanning. She draws a deep long breath, and lays her interlaced white hands over her heart, with a feeling of astonishment that any heart can go so quick. She had thought that the season for heart-beat was over in her life; that through all her future years, however many and long, it would always pace on at its usual even jog-trot. And now, he who alone had ever made that steadfast heart hasten its healthy pace; he alone of all mankind in whose arms she has ever lain; he on whose breast her many tears dropped, as they stood together on the brown gold of the sea-sands; he—her alone love—her faulty, unstable, disloyal one love—is again her housemate—is again within reach of her unwilling eyes—of her pained reluctant ears.

She looks out at the shadows, shaking and shifting in the gusty moonlight. Is he too awake now? Is his heart too racing at the

same hard sick gallop? Are his eyes as dry and wide and hopelessly wakeful? It is most unlikely. Why are they here? To what end does the Great Purpose that guides our destinies allow these two broken dissevered lives again to intersect each other? How many hundreds of thousands of women are there in England to whom Lalage might harmlessly have been cousin! How many homes where their arrival would have quickened no pulse-beat! Why then must they come here where their coming murders sleep, sets cool cheeks burning, makes a trouble in quiet veins, and wakes old dead longings out of their frosty sleep?

The battle has to be fought all over again —the battle which she had looked upon as belonging as completely to the past as her grandfather's death, or her own heart-wrench at leaving Dering; the battle of which it has long seemed to her as if only a kind and gentle memory of its slain were left; and

which now she already feels beginning to rage and noise within her. It is long indeed before Joan falls asleep; nor even then does her slumber merit the worthy name of sleep, so distressed is it by blind and futile dreams—anxious, struggling, unquiet. When first the early light (for she has left the blind up), striking on her shut eyes, half wakes her, she turns and hides all her face in the pillow, with a misty longing to keep full consciousness at bay—a vague endeavour not to examine into the nature and quality of this lump of lead that is lying on her soul. But even the dim thought of it brings, in a moment, the complete waking that she dreads. Here she is face to face in the broad new daylight with her trouble; face to face, as she has already been by candle-light, by star-light, and in darkness.

It is Sunday morning, and Joan begins it with a headache. Not a good, thorough, ceremonious headache, such as justifies staying

in bed in silence and solitude, with closed shutters and banished light, but an insignificant common one, such as hinders one in the doing of no usual duty, but puts a pin-prick into every one; such a headache as makes the eyes heavy, the nerves jarring, the temper tart, such as renders a dull noise unpleasant and a sharp one insupportable.

It is unlucky that on such a day, the children—usually not much wickeder than their neighbours—should have elected to be suddenly possessed by a devil of teasing and tiresome naughtiness of unfunny loud fun, and excessive foolish mirth. This indeed does not apply to Montacute, who is, as usual, buried in a book, and only emerges from it every now and then, to put irrelevant and posing questions about the equator. Joan has never hitherto realised how very little she knows about the equator. Rupert and Faustine are seated side by side; each with a smart Bible open on their knees;

ostensibly committing to memory passages of Scripture; in reality, diversifying and lightening their labours by a good deal of covert scuffling, and much fatiguing causeless chuckled laughter. By and by Rupert varies the programme by breaking out into snatches of low-lived rhyme. His small childish voice uplifts itself, high and shrill, in the following choice ditty:

"Mr. Lobsky said to his ugly wife,
'I'm going to the river to fish for my life.'
'You nasty beast, you know you aren't,
'You know you're going to *galliwarnt*.'"

"Rupert!" cries Joan, lifting her aching head from her supporting hand, and speaking in a tone of irritated sharpness most unusual to her, "what do you mean? stop, this instant!"

"James sings it!" replies Rupert triumphantly—James is one of the footmen—"he is always singing it; he knows a great many more verses!"

"I daresay!" says Joan tartly, "I am not

James's governess; if I were, I should certainly forbid his deafening me with such a hideous song, as I now forbid you!"

Rupert looks rebellious, but does not answer verbally. He indemnifies himself, however, for this silence, and exhibits at the same time his independence of spirit, and his high courage, by repeating over a great number of times to himself in a semi-audible recitation the objectionable words, in place of those of the chapter which he is learning. His sister, Faustine, though not particularly anxious to engage in any iniquity on her own account, having before her eyes too plainly the possible penalty of forfeited Sunday-late dinner, is yet able to enjoy the safe satisfaction of egging on her brother by many pregnant looks, expressive nudges, and an affectation of extravagant merriment. Of all these phenomena, though specially aimed at her, Joan takes no manner of notice, chiefly because she feels that if she did, she would,

in the present state of her nerves, be led into the expression of a wrath so disproportionate to the offence, as would for ever wound her prestige in the eyes of her disciples. She feels it a little hard that Anthony, Mr. Lobsky, and her headache should all have come on the scene at the same time. She could have coped well enough with one at a time, or perhaps even with two; but now that they face her all three abreast, she feels that they are almost too many for her. By and by the nudging and chuckling, the recitation and its attendant applause, wear themselves out, and come to an end. Rupert and Faustine retire to the farthest window, where they remain for some time so unnaturally quiet, that John feels at length constrained to examine into the cause of this abnormal stillness. She finds her pupils recreating themselves with the ingenious and novel amusement of trying which can get a farthing farthest up their nose.

It is church-time at last. Joan and the children have reached the church. The sun has made John's head worse; and Montacute, unconscious of the pain he is inflicting, has harried her with the equator up to the church door. Thank God, it is left on the threshold, to be taken up again, no doubt, the moment that the sermon is ended.

Faustine ahead, and sobered by the consciousness of a smart frock, a smarter hat, and superbly *crêpéd* hair walks sedately along, no longer a boisterous child; a mincing self-conscious little woman of the world. They are in church now, and are seated in the hindermost of the half-dozen open sittings appertaining to the Smith Deloraine family. It is a little old church, whose every wall and corner are covered and crowded with monuments to and effigies of, one family—not of the Smith Deloraines, it is hardly needful to say; since it is well known that it is not more than twenty years that they have

been in a position to put up angels and willows to each other—but of a knightly, long decayed, and now extinct race. Joan's eyes have often sought these worn memorials with a sense of sympathy and fellow-feeling for these dogs who, like her, have had their day. To-day she gives no heed to the quiet dead. Her thoughts are too hotly occupied with the living. By and by the clergyman and his clerk make their modest entry, which, as it happens simultaneously with that of the Smith Deloraine party, is absolutely unnoticed and swamped.

The school children's heads turn towards the door as unanimously as if they were ripe ears of corn swept all one way by the wind. Even adult heads seem unable to keep quite straight. Here they come, with a swish, a rustle, a frou-frou? Lalage sweeping the dust of the aisle with a faint-coloured costly gown; her gay cold eyes roving all about the church; her red lips still parted in

the laugh which she has evidently brought with her, as Montacute did the equator, to the church door. The ladies first, then the men; the host, with his civil smug commercial smile; here they all are! Here, amongst them, is the millionaire, looking, if possible, smaller, redder, forlorner by daylight, than he did by candlelight. He comes in with his white eyelashes cast down, awkwardly stumbling over the last lady's train. On catching sight of John, he takes sudden timid refuge in the pew with her and the children, where, after having noisily knocked down his umbrella, and dropped his prayer-book irrecoverably far into the pew before him, he at length subsides into a seat beside the very upright, supercilious small figure and long dangling legs of Miss Faustine.

Every lady present has brought her mate with her, every lady, with one exception. That exception is Lalage. Colonel Wolferstan is not here. Perhaps something has re-

tarded him, and he may follow them. The clergyman reads the opening words of the exhortation, and every one stands up. But there are several late entries; even after the service has begun; even after the Confession is reached. At each entry Joan's heart seems to turn a somersault, and a tremor runs over all her kneeling body.

"Is this he?" No—this person's boots creak! this cannot be he!"

After several new alarms, when at length the First Lesson is reached her fears begin to subside. For the moment she is safe. Not yet will her eyes be pained by the sight of him; not yet, not until luncheon-time! And when luncheon comes—when, with heart again throbbing and tumbling miserably, she enters the dining-room, neither is he here. Every one else is assembled, and beginning to eat with the whetted appetite that going to church always seems to engender.

A place is laid for him, therefore he cannot be gone away; he must still be in the house. But no one seems to miss him; no one takes the trouble to inquire after him—that is, not until luncheon is well advanced towards its conclusion; not until cold cutlets and salmon have given way to jellies and trifle.

Then, at last, in a lull of the general talk, Mrs. Smith Deloraine carelessly—as if the idea of his absence had just struck her—asks:

"Does Anthony never eat luncheon?"

"*Does not he?*" replies his wife expressively, as she leisurely pinches the peaches to find the ripest. "Perhaps you think that he never goes to church either; I assure you that he is mostly exceedingly punctual in the performance of both duties. What has made him quarrel with his bread and butter to-day, I can't guess; you had better ask him!"

"If you please 'm," says the butler, striking with polite gravity into the conver-

sation, "Colonel Wolferstan has gone out for a long walk; he desired me to say, if he were asked for, that he did not think he should be back much before dinner-time."

"A long walk!" repeats Lalage, lifting her eyes and shrugging her large shoulders; "in this sun!—Well, *chacun à son goût! I* am ordered to walk, so I suppose he thinks that he can do it for me!" (with a sarcastic laugh). "I am sure he is very welcome to try!—he may also eat gruel and dry biscuits for me if he likes."

Joan does not go to church a second time. It is Mr. Smith Deloraine's habit to monopolise his children on Sunday afternoons; and on this Sunday Joan certainly does not quarrel with the custom. She pulls the schoolroom blinds half down, so as to exclude the strongest light, and yet admit all the air; and drawing a little couch up to the window, lies down upon it and heaves a long sigh of relief.

There are ahead of her three good hours of solitude, of silence, of soul-and-body-calming rest. But are there? Let no one count their chickens before they are hatched; or if they do, at least let them make a large allowance for addled eggs. Joan has not lain on her sofa for more than twenty minutes, with eyes sometimes closed, sometimes opening with a dim pleasure on the profuse great flowers of the violet-coloured clematis that is looking in at the window; on the peep of cool pale sky and tall still poplar. She has only just begun to feel that if she can but give it time this prescription of dumb inaction will abate and finally kill the dull pain in her brows, when there comes a knock at the door, and before she has time either to permit or to forbid, the knocker enters—enters with the silent light foot and the noisy gown that bespeak a woman. Joan turns her head slowly in vexed inquiry as to who the disturber of her peace may be. It is Lalage.

"Are the children here?" she says, looking quickly round the room. "No?—that is right! I thought I saw the little monsters promenading out of doors, which is what gave me courage to come up. You are resting?" she goes on, advancing into the room, and shutting the door behind her. "I heard you say that you had a headache! I daresay that you do not thank me for disturbing you? Do not stir, pray! Well, of course, if you insist!"

This is a figure of speech, for Joan is very far indeed from insisting. Without more ado, or any further compunction, her visitor takes possession of Joan's couch, and stretching her supine length comfortably upon it, crosses her feet, and arranges the pillow to her liking, while the endless yards of her ivory gown lie in confused pale waves on the carpet beside her.

"Are they likely to be away some time?" continues Lalage, still thinking of the chil-

dren. "Yes?—bravo! But if they return unexpectedly, please explain to them at once that I hate children, and that I have no desire to be climbed up like a ladder, nor to be told home truths, nor asked indecent questions—the only three ways, it seems to me, that children ever have of making themselves agreeable."

"I will tell them," answers Joan, repressing a sigh at the evidence of an intention to make a long stay, and walking across the room to get a chair for herself.

"How well you wear!" cries Lalage, following her light movements with a not ill-natured envy. "I believe it is because you are not married."

Joan smiles.

"Do you think so? And yet insurance offices tell you that a married woman's life is worth more than a single one's."

"Pooh!" says Lalage contemptuously; "that only proves that insurance offices never

can have been married themselves. I am convinced that I should not have gone to pieces nearly so quickly if I had remained Lalage Beauchamp."

"Are you serious?" asks Joan, forgetting her headache, and leaning forwards with clasped hands and grave blue eyes fixed in distressed and earnest inquiry on her companion's indifferent face.

"Serious? of course I am!" (with a laugh). "Do you think that a woman who weighs fourteen stone is likely to be anything but serious? I think that marriage is the most colossal imposture in existence, so does Anthony. It is the one point on which we agree."

Joan is silent—a dismayed, lily-cheeked silence.

"In any other undertaking," continues Lalage, showing her handsome white teeth in an ungoverned yawn, "one is allowed a trial trip — a preliminary canter; this,

the weightiest of all, is the sole exception."

Joan has moved her eyes from her companion's face. They are again looking out of window, as they were before her solitude was broken, but they no longer take pleasure in, or even see, the clematis blooms, the great old poplar, nor the morsel of pretty faint sky. A wave of new pain is rolling over her soul: pain, not for herself, but for him. Is this the goal whither her renunciation has led him?

"It is a provision for old age, that is all that one can say," says Lalage, with her little hard cool laugh.

"A provision for old age!" repeats Joan, echoing each word with slow precision, and speaking in a wonder-struck tone. Quicker than the jagged lightning flash travels her thoughts have fled back to the opulent summer morning on which he and she had sat side by side on the warm sea sands, mapping out a high and lovely joint life. Is this what

it has come to? And if it is so, has she indeed done well and wisely by him? It is the first time that ever this sharp doubt has stung her heart.

"I daresay that if I had been an old maid I should not have liked it," continues Lalage, wiping with her little fine handkerchief from her eyes the tears that exaggerated yawning has brought into them; "but at present, to be one is my *beau idéal* of felicity; a well-to-do old maid, with a comfortable sum in the three per cents.—not landed property—I have no opinion of landed property, all outgoings, and no incomings—with a good *chef*, and not a relation in the world! I cannot imagine anything pleasanter."

"No?" (in an absent tone).

"Or a widow," says Lalage, in a key of pensive reflection, trifling with the wedding-ring, which has grown too tight for her finger. "Widows have not half a bad time of it."

Joan gives a great start. Her hands invo-

luntarily grow clenched, and a river of angry carnation pours into her cheeks.

"*A widow?*" she says, in a strangled voice.

"An abstract widow, of course!" says Lalage, looking with a lazy entertainment at her companion's flushed face; "not poor dear old Tony's! that is *sous-entendu!* Indeed, as far as appearances go, he is much more likely to be my widower than I to be his widow! Has *he* added three stone to his weight in the last two years, pray? Does it matter at what hour of the day or night *he* gets up? Does any one wish to diet him?"

There is a silence. Joan, alarmed at, and ashamed of her own manifestation of emotion, has turned her head half away, and is again looking out of the window, trying to school her turbid soul into quiet again; to draw calmness from the calm sky, and serenity from the still garden trees.

"To be well off," says Lalage presently, clasping her hands behind her gold head, and

staring lazily up at the ceiling; "that, after all, is the Alpha and Omega! whether you are maid, wife, or widow is a bagatelle in comparison! We are not well off. No doubt you have heard—one always hears these amiable trifles!"

"I—I—did hear a whisper," replies Joan, stammering a little.

"If it were not so unpleasant," says Lalage, while a small dry smile curls her mouth, "it would really be rather comic! There are so few things that I have ever thought worth the trouble of hating; but ever since I can remember—ever since I could walk alone—I have always abhorred poverty and everything pertaining to it—it has been my one bugaboo. In marrying Anthony I imagined that I had so completely given it the slip, and now!" (with a pregnant shrug and expansion of the hands).

"You do not look very poor," says Joan, with an embarrassed smile, and a glance at

the other's rich gown; of which a man's eye would take in only the beauty, but a woman's also the cost.

"Bah!" cries Lalage lightly, "one must have one's *chiffons*. The poverty whose fingers come through its gloves, and its toes through its boots, is not by any means the worst!"

There is a moment's silence.

"And so you are poor?" says Joan presently, in a subdued voice and with a long wondering sigh. "Is it possible? The very last person with whom I could ever have connected the idea of restricted means and narrow ways, is—"

"I," interrupts Lalage, finishing her companion's sentence for her in a different way from what she herself had intended; "so every one says! I wonder why. I suppose I look expensive!"

"I suppose you do!" (in an absent voice).

"When the old gentleman died," continues

Mrs. Wolferstan, in an easy narrative tone, "it was only sixteen months after we married —I remember thinking how lucky we were to come into our kingdom so early—and indeed, for his own sake, poor old gentleman" (laughing flippantly), "one could not regret that he was removed to a world where perhaps he might be able to blow his own nose. Well, as I was saying, when he died—"

"Yes?"

"It came to light when things were looked into, that, for the last five years, he had been tranquilly living at the rate of exactly double his income—trying to live up to the house in fact. It had always been twice too large for the property. People have no business" (in a tone of indolent indignation) "to build a palace in a kailyard; it gives one such false impressions. I am sure when I left the Abbey, after that first visit, that I quite carried away the idea that they were millionaires. Did not you?"

"I never thought about it!" answers Joan quickly and coldly, flushing again with indignant pain.

"No?—well, I did. I have always" (laughing lazily) "had an eye to the main chance!"

"And Colonel Wolferstan?" asks Joan, resolutely conquering her difficulty in pronouncing his name, and speaking in a steady low voice. "Did the blow find him quite unprepared? had he no suspicion?"

"None whatever," replies Lalage calmly; "if he had, of course I should have had too; are not we" (smiling ironically) "one flesh? The old woman had been perfectly aware of the state of the case all along, but would never hear of any reduction of expenditure, for fear of lessening her own prestige. Did you ever hear of such selfishness? But I am not at all surprised; I say of her as Voltaire said of the prophet Habakkuk: '*Ce coquin d'Habakkuk est capable de tout!*' She is *capable de tout!*"

Joan laughs, genuinely amused for the moment; but her laugh soon dies, killed by the train of disagreeable reflections that her companion's careless speech has woke to life. Anthony poor! Anthony roughly divorced from his costly pleasures! Anthony struggling to make two ends meet! The notion is so incongruous that for some moments she remains in a bewildered silence; trying in vain to make the idea of this new Anthony fit in, in some degree, with that of the old one. By and by she speaks; and this is the outcome of her meditations.

"Your moor? have you given that up?"

"Of course," replies Lalage serenely; "have not we given everything up?—we have not yet been reduced to parting with our hair or our front teeth, like the girl in 'Les Misérables,' but that is about the only depth of destitution that we have not touched! As for the moor, I confess it cost me not a pang! I never cared for Scotland; I dislike the

climate, the scenery, the life;—no, to be honest, that was no great privation."

"Not to *you*, perhaps!" says Joan quickly, "but——"

"But to Anthony!" rejoins Lalage, finishing the sentence; "I daresay!" (indifferently)—"I never asked him."

"And his horses?" pursues Joan, with a contained eagerness; "surely he has not given up his hunting?"

"Surely he has though!" replies the other with a faint playful mimicking of the tragic emphasis of her companion's tone; "I see that you cannot yet fully grasp the idea of our impecuniosity; it took me some time; but I think I have a good firm grip of it now. A couple of pair of carriage horses—one cannot possibly do with less in London, so I told him, and he saw the justice of it—compose our whole stud; hunters as well are, of course, out of the question."

"How he must miss them!" says Joan, in

a low voice, with an involuntarily compassionate inflection addressing rather herself than her visitor.

"Of course!" (placidly), "he never says anything; I daresay he will get a mount now and then!"

Joan is again stupidly silent. Pity, indignation, bewilderment, half a dozen other ingredients, go to make up a painful thought-jumble; a sort of mental resurrection-pie.

"If any person has a taste for making a martyr of himself," says Lalage presently, in a comfortable leisurely voice, "I am the last to prevent him! personally I have no turn for martyrdom: I have the meanest opinion of hair shirts and lentile pottage; I should have cut but a poor figure among the early Christians; 'Eat the fat, and drink the sweet, is, and always has been, and always shall be, my motto; but if any one else prefers to eat the thin and drink the sour, why, let him, in

Heaven's name, say I!" (expanding her hands with her favourite gesture).

"But surely," cries Joan eagerly, yet puzzled; "it can be no question of *preference*, it must be necessity, not choice!"

"So one would imagine, would not one?" replies Lalage, with a dispassionate air; "it shows how much one knows about men!"

"Of course," says Joan hesitatingly, divided between a keen curiosity and most anxious interest on the one side, and the dread of appearing intrusive on the other; "of course, when I speak I am drawing a bow at a venture, for I know none of the circumstances of the case!"

"Do not you?" says Lalage carelessly; "I thought everybody did; well, they are soon told!—it is just this, that if he would but consent to sell the Abbey, we should be no worse off than our neighbours: we should not be Rothschilds of course, but we should be able to pay the butcher, the baker, and

the candlestick-maker, and leave a good margin besides for our little pet sins; can you fancy any one hesitating?" A moment later, as Joan remains struck with a painful dumbness, she goes on: "Perhaps you think that he is hampered by the entail? not at all!—he and his father cut it off: he can make ducks and drakes of the estate if he chooses; can leave it to you—to me—to a lying-in hospital, or a penitentiary—whichever he likes!"

"Sell it!" says Joan at length, in a deep and altered voice ladened with astonished distress; as, with a pang of keenest fellow-feeling for Anthony, she lives over again vividly in memory that black moment when she first heard that Dering was to come to the hammer; "but you are joking!—they have been Wolferstans of the Abbey ever since——"

"Ever since Henry the Eighth turned out an Abbey full of comfortable fat monks for

them," interrupts Lalage suavely; "yes, I know. Well" (laughing), "the matter lies in a nut-shell: the monks turned out for them, and now they must turn out for somebody else!—it is what one sees every day! what can be simpler?"

Joan has been looking at her companion during the last sentence; trying in vain to keep out of her eyes the wonder and repulsion that will stream into them.

"And have you succeeded?" she asks, in a rather choked voice; "is it to be sold?"

Lalage shrugs again expressively.

"Not it! he would sell me first! I am not sure that he did not tell me so!" (with an amused look). Joan draws an involuntary breath of relief. "Personally I hate the place," continues Lalage composedly; "that continual booming of the sea and sighing among the fir-tops makes me feel ready to cut my throat; and in the house I always

have an unpleasant feeling of being in church; but for selling purposes it is excellent: 'An ancestral mansion situated in its own park of—how many acres?—within easy reach of three packs of hounds; two hours by rail from London; twenty minutes' drive from a station—a quarter of an hour's walk from the sea!' It describes admirably and I made two or three telling advertisements about it which I read to Anthony; he was so angry; I never saw him in such a fury—he raged like a lion! I laughed—I could not help it—of course that made him worse, but I really could not help it!"

"It was naturally no laughing matter to him!" says Joan, slowly and dryly; casting down the eyes from which she feels that sparks of fire hotter and brighter than an affair not in any way personal ought to call forth, are darting.

"Of course not!" replies Lalage good-humouredly; "one never sees jokes at one's

own expense: I" (beginning to laugh) "can see no humour in witticisms about fat people; I bear him no malice, though he did look as if he should enjoy murdering me, and though he did throw my advertisements into the fire! —poor old Tony!"

Poor old Tony indeed! If decorum prohibits Joan from echoing the ejaculation aloud, at least it reverberates over and over again deep down in her heart like a shouted name that one mountain catches from another.

"Sometimes," continues Lalage, with philosophy, "it strikes me that he must be a little touched in the head like his father. Who but a madman would sacrifice his whole life to the dry bones of a dead idea? Will you believe it that he has set himself the task of clearing the property and paying off the mortgages?—he might just as well begin to pay off the National Debt at once; and for my part, I should not be at all surprised at his

trying; and, meanwhile, what is his existence worth?—he has put down his horses, let his shooting, given up his river in Norway and his moor in Scotland! Sometimes I am quite in spirits, he looks so wobegone that I think he must be coming to his senses; but no—as soon as I begin my delicate little approaches I find that he is as mulish as ever; however" (with a light-hearted laugh), "I do not at all despair! I do not disdain to take a lesson from the humble gnat, and think that by inserting my little sting at every hour of the day and night, I must be ultimately successful, do not you think so?"

"I think that there is no doubt of it!" answers Joan, with a subdued bitterness.

"We have not even the excuse of having children," goes on Lalage dispassionately; "and, please God, we never shall! in my state of health it is most improbable!—that" (with a smile) "is the silver lining to my cloud. Fat I am, and, alas! am likely to be; but I

am not likely to be a mother! I believe in compensations! Hush! I hear the children! —'the Philistines be upon thee, Samson!' I fly!"

CHAPTER V.

"I LIKE him!" says Faustine; says it with a decision that at once challenges and defies contradiction.

Two nights and a day have passed since the arrival of the Wolferstans. Joan's cheeks and lips and heart have had thirty-six good hours in which to recover themselves; and pretty well righted they are. At least, such is the impression that the outside gives; and happily for all of us, none can peep inside the machine and see what tricks our wheels and springs are playing us.

Joan has borne Rupert's French, and Faustine's music—the two most trying items of the curriculum—with about as much patience as usual; and now the workmen's bell has long and loud rung twelve. The lesson books are slammed with joyous disrespect. The children's fidgety limbs are released from their chairs, and their insatiate tongues unloosed; nor has Joan any ostensible reason for hindering them from lighting on the one theme from which she would fain have them by all means hold off; viz., Colonel Wolferstan.

"I like him!" says Faustine, with condescending emphasis; "he asked me whether I would be his sweetheart!"

"That was nonsense!" says Rupert roughly: "he has a wife already; a man cannot have a wife and a sweetheart too, can he, Miss Dering?"

"Of course not!" replies Joan gravely; but she stoops her head over her desk to

hide the twitching of the corners of her mouth engendered by this naïf query.

"He can though!" cries Montacute, whose thoughts have, for a wonder, kept up with the current of conversation, shaking his head wisely, and looking up with a knowing old look on his small face; "Lord Nelson had; Lady Hamilton was his sweetheart!"

"Then he had not a wife!" says Faustine with calm confidence; "had he, Miss Dering?"

"But he had!" asseverates Montacute, raising his little voice in angry indignation at having his facts impugned; "and Lady Hamilton was his sweetheart!"

"She was not!" cries Rupert, to whom it is rapidly becoming a party question, speaking rudely, and beginning to bluster; "was she, Miss Dering?"

"You are a very naughty boy to say so, when Miss Dering says that she could not have been!" says Faustine, in a tone of pharisaical elder sister reproof. "Ah!" (as

a step is heard outside, and through the door, accidentally left ajar, a figure is seen traversing the passage)—"Ah! there is Colonel Wolferstan!—we will ask him!"

"Do not, for Heaven's sake! do not!" cries Joan in a stifled voice, half rising from her chair, and stretching out an eagerly detaining hand; but it is in vain. The children either do not hear or do not heed. They have precipitated themselves through the door, and throwing themselves on Colonel Wolferstan, are dragging him—a reluctant victim—into the room. Faustine and Rupert are urging him with imperative small hands, and Montacute by moral pressure.

He is in the room now: though (having her back to him) she does not see him, she yet feels it; standing tall and silent by the door. Silent; for it would be useless for him as yet to attempt to speak; such is the Babel of loud little voices that uplifts itself

round him. At first it is impossible to detect any separate articulate sound, in the vague hubbub; but after a moment or two these three questions, each volleyed simultaneously by a different mouth, assail the listener's ear.

"Colonel Wolferstan, was not Lady Hamilton Lord Nelson's sweetheart?"

"Is not it naughty of Monty to say so?"

"A man cannot have a wife and a sweetheart too, can he? Miss Dering says he cannot!"

"Quite impossible!" replies Wolferstan decisively, and with prompt gravity.

The children are still pulling him in determinately. Perhaps he lends himself a little to their importunities, for he is now beside the square baize table, from which Joan has risen; and their troubled eyes have met.

"It was not my fault!" he says in a low voice of apology; speaking with an uncertain

smile; "I did not mean to disturb you! I had no thought of coming in! it was their doing! they made me!"

"It—it—is of no consequence!" she says, stammering a little; "you—you are welcome—we have finished lessons."

As she speaks, she turns quickly away, and begins with trembling hands to collect the grammars, dictionaries, and copybooks, which the pupils, in their laudable eagerness to arrive at a just knowledge of the laws of morality, have forgotten and neglected. They have again seized upon their guest now, rather perhaps to his relief, and have dragged him off to the window, to show him Faustine's slim wedded canaries, and Monty's scolding bachelor bullfinch, who are swinging aloft in gay cages. They keep him there, engaged in desultory conversation for some minutes; Montacute and Faustine each tightly clutching one of his hands, and Rupert swarming up his leg.

Joan blesses them for it. For a little while, she is not aware of what is passing. There is a sort of thickness in her hearing; but, by and by, she is herself again. She hears Rupert's voice successfully lifted above those of his brother and sister; and apparently engaged in giving a fragmentary biography of his family.

"My papa is a very nice gentleman," he is saying boastfully, "and he has a beautiful dog-cart; and when he dies, it will be mine!"

"But you would rather have your father than the dog-cart, would not you?" suggests Wolferstan mildly.

"Ye—es" (very hesitatingly and doubtfully); "but" (with great alacrity and animation) "but it is a beautiful dog-cart!"

"There *is* papa!" cries Faustine, pricking up her ears at the sound of distant voices; "he is talking to mamma; I daresay that they are quarrelling again! Monty, let us come and listen!"

In a moment they have all sped away on this fresh track; out of the room, along the passages, down the stairs, their six feet go flying and pattering. They take noise and ease with them—they leave silence and embarrassment behind.

Deprived of their chaperonage, the two victims, whom they have led into this snare and then left to make the best of their way out of it again, stand stupidly mute; Anthony by the window, Joan by the table. But for the shrilling of the canaries and the little hopping noise of the sleek bullfinch from perch to perch, there would be dead silence. Anthony is the first to regain the power of articulation:

"So—so—this is your kingdom!" he says, suddenly and awkwardly, snatching a hurried glance at the face from which he has, for the last two days, been averting his eyes, as if it were some unpleasant sight.

"Yes, this is my kingdom!" she answers laughing nervously.

Then there is silence again. To both it seems as if, in the whole range of language, there were nothing else left to say. In their hearts, indeed, are words enough and to spare; hundreds of sentences ready dressed to come forth, but every one of them begins with "Do you remember?" "Have you forgotten?" and to all such, utterance is for ever debarred.

Their thoughts are shaking hands again in the past. Each knows that the other is back with him or her in memory, in the Moberleys' sordid room, where, with the snow coldly falling and the wind keening outside, good and evil had fought out their fight on the battle-field of their rent hearts. But henceforth neither eyes nor lips must confess this shared knowledge.

Wolferstan has turned his back on the clematis and the birds, and is leaning against the window-shutter. His eyes are resting uncomfortably on her; after all he must learn

to look at her. A head like a bird's, a skin like cream and sweet flowers, long limbs like a racer's and a smile like light! What lovely or noble thing is there that has not some likeness to or kinship with her? He is thinking this with an envious wrung heart, when the necessity for speech of some kind again strikes him with urgent force, and drives him to this utterance; an utterance not at all intended by him, or approved by his deliberate judgment:

"They are kind to you, I suppose?" he says abruptly; "they treat you well?"

She draws a long breath, and passes her hand over her eyes as one that awakes from a trance.

"Yes," she says, with almost her usual composure, smiling quietly. "I am afraid that I cannot *poser* for an ill-used governess. I have not one single slight or insult to boast of. I can only hope that Faustine will be as slow as she can in growing up; I shudder to see how tall she is already!"

"They treat you quite like one of the family, in fact?" he says with a bitter short laugh. "How kind of them! Well" (with an impatient toss of his head), "we all know that it is a topsy-turvy world. When I think—when I remember—"

"When you remember the old Dering days?" she says, with a sad tranquillity; "the days when they were plain Smiths, before they had effloresced into Deloraines; when I used to ask them to my mixum-gatherum parties, and think myself very condescending for shaking hands with him! Well" (with a slightly ironical smile), "I have my reward. Now that the tables are turned, he very seldom forgets to bid me 'good-morning,' or 'good-evening.'"

She says it with a matter-of-fact composure that her auditor is unable to emulate. Neither voice nor face are well under his command. He turns away and leans out of the window, round which the clematis sprays

and the flushing Virginia creeper make a thick and pleasant frame. Questions that he could not allow himself while he was facing her, he can put now.

"Are you happy?" he asks, in a sudden quick voice, so low that she can scarce catch the words, which seem to be addressed rather to the birds and the flowers, who, at least, might certainly answer "Yes," than to her.

She starts a little at the unexpected question, and sighs.

"Happy?" she repeats with a lingering accent of reflection; "it is a question that I never ask myself; which, I suppose is an argument that I *am* happy—as one never asks oneself whether one is alive. I have moderate healthy work that is not disagreeable to me, and that is quite within my powers; I have no pain of mind or body; I have no desire to hurry or retard the days as they go—quite content that they should

slide on smoothly thus to the end. Yes—surely I am happy!" There is a tone of involuntary inquiry and appeal in her last words. She has certainly no intention of making him the judge of the measure of her content, and yet there is a note of indecision and questioning in her speech. He makes, however, no comment on it. He has stretched out his arm far down, to pluck from the house-wall a golden-hearted Marshal Niel rose, that, with the giant clematis and the flaming creeper, makes a glorious trinity of colours. "And you?" she says by and by, seeing that he continues silent, and speaking with an accent of quiet grave interest.

He draws his arm in again, and it falls inertly to his side. Then he wheels back into his former position, and their sad eyes once more meet.

"Am I happy?" he says, slowly and incisively. "That is one of the questions of which one knows the answer beforehand; I

have no need to add up and balance the items of my felicity!" After a pause: "You know," he continues, "that I have gone down in the world—gone down with a run; and I do not like it. I dislike it extremely!" He speaks with a boyish energy of petulance that, for the first time, recalls to her mind the old Anthony.

"So did I!" she answers gravely; "but one grows used to it. I think that I should hardly understand how to go uphill now!"

"You know that the Abbey is let?" he goes on presently, casting down his eyes and speaking in a tone of sullen dejection; "it has been in our family for three centuries and a half, and it has never been let before. Do you think that that is a bitter pill to swallow? or will one grow used to that too?"

Joan sighs.

"At least it is not sold!" she says, while her look wanders ruefully away through the open window in the direction of her own

irrecoverably lost home; "at least it is yours still; but—" (hesitating a little, and speaking with an accent of diffident interest) "was it quite—quite unavoidable? was there no help for it?"

"We might have gone on living there, if we had lived very quietly," he replies gloomily, not raising his eyes; "if we had sent away half the servants and foregone society; but" (shaking his head) "that of course was a sacrifice that one could not ask of any woman!"

"I suppose not," she answers with slow and dubious assent; but against even such assent her whole soul rises up within her in rebellious outcry.

"So it is let!" he repeats, with the same depressed intonation. "I am no longer Wolferstan of the Abbey; I am Wolferstan pure and simple—Wolferstan on his own merits, and I find" (laughing ironically) "that it makes a good deal of difference!"

A great wave of compassion rushes over her heart as she looks in his aged and sobered face, out of which the young jollity, the happy causeless hilarity, foolish, yet beautiful too, have for ever disappeared.

"I am sorry!—oh sorry!" she says in a sighing whisper under her breath. Then, a moment later, raising eyes in which a steady light is burning, "and yet," she says, with a spirited look of courage and faith, "as I told you long ago, I have always thought that unbroken good luck is a doubtful boon to any one; it is what God seldom gives to His choicest ones!"

"Do you think not?" says the young man. "Then" (with a sarcastic accent) "I indeed stand higher in His esteem than I had any idea of. Do you think" (smiling bitterly) "that He has any more proofs of approbation in store for me?"

She turns away chilled and discouraged; and sitting down hastily at the table, shades

with her hands the eyes into which his harsh and scoffing words have made the salt tears spring. In a moment he has crossed the room, and is standing beside her, bending over the slight stooped body, on which he no longer dare lay a finger; which never again dare he take into his empty arms.

"Have patience with me!" he says in a rough and broken voice; "you know that formerly—always—even in the old time—I used to turn my worst side toward you; indeed I have a better side, though you certainly have no reason for believing it; but indeed I have!"

"I have never doubted it," she answers, quietly raising her look, wet, yet confident, to his.

"At least," he says, with greater eagerness and animation than she has yet seen on his changed and saddened features, "at least I am no longer in the ranks of the drones; you were always" (smiling wistfully) "rather

hard upon the drones, were not you? Well then, I am not one any longer: I am a worker —a bungling, botching worker, it is true— but still I am one!"

"Are you?" she says, a ray of pure bright pleasure shooting from under the darkness of her curled lashes. "I am glad!"

"You know," he says, with a sigh of relief, as one that is not used to so interested a listener, "that it is hard to learn one's alphabet when one is grown up. Well, that is just what I am doing; I am learning my A B C like a great overgrown dunce. No cockney that ever lived all his life within the sound of Bow Bells knew less about the management of an estate than I did, so late in the day as it is—do you know" (with a fleeting smile) "that I have struck thirty?—I have put myself to school to my own agent. No?" (seeing her questioning look) "not at Helmsley! I do not know what heights of heroism I may climb by and by; but as yet the wound

is too raw; as yet" (writhing a little and flushing painfully) "I do not think I could make up my mind to leave cards at the Abbey, and ask permission to drive through the park."

She shudders and makes a silent gesture of assent; and he goes on:

"You know" (smiling again rather sorrowfully), it seems as if all my sentences began with 'you know,' does not it? But, indeed, you do know, or at least you did, nearly all that there is to know about me. You know that I have a good deal of land in ——shire. Well, there is the scene of my labours. I am living in a little house in an out-of-the-way part of the world, where there is no society of any kind to distract me, and I am at work all day, and every day—out and about from morning to night, and when I come in, thank God, I am so tired that I fall asleep like a dog!"

He has finished, and she makes for the

moment no comment. She would find it, indeed, rather difficult to do so, for the picture he has drawn of his present life, set side by side with that of his past, which is standing out so vividly and in such glorious gay colours, against the background of her memory, makes her utterance uncertain and her throat choked. After a while, however, she gets back her self-command, and speaks in an even low voice.

"But," she says gently, "if Mrs. Wolferstan found the dullness of the Abbey so unendurable, I do not quite see how she is bettered by the condition of things you describe."

For a moment he looks puzzled and at sea; then he turns away his head and speaks in a formal parrot tone, as if it were a lesson learned by rote:

"Oh, you misunderstand me; Lalage never accompanies me. It is—it is—not at all in her line. You know that she never

was fond of the country; no, I am quite alone."

He says it in a matter-of-fact voice, without any affectation of pathos, but it goes to her heart more than any laboured Jeremiad would have done. Alone, quite alone for all his life! whether his wife is beside or absent from him, equally quite alone. There is a silence. The bullfinch with his head a good deal on one side, is croaking his little cheerful hoarse song. Joan has replaced her hands above her eyes. They make a shady white pent-house, under which the eyes themselves may be as moist as they please. By and by he speaks.

"Do not be sorry for me," he says in a moved tone; "indeed I had no idea that you would be so sorry. I do very well, and every day now I shall do better. When first the crash came" (beginning to walk up and down the room with his eyes on the floor)—"coming as it did" (in a hurried low voice) "on the

top of other worse losses, I thought for a time that I was going like my father" (touching his head). "These curses are sometimes hereditary; but, thank God, the cobwebs have cleared out of my brain. It was not only the *money*" (with a contemptuous accent); "I could very well have seen that go if I had had anything else to fall back upon—anything at home; but you know" (sinking his voice) "that I had nothing,"

Again there is silence, a heavy-hearted silence; when there being nothing good left to say, the only refuge is in dumbness. It is broken by the sound of the returning children's voices and feet. Here they all come! Here they are, bursting into the still room, dancing, quarrelling, squealing.

"Mamma was crying," says Rupert, awed yet triumphant. "She pretended that she was only blowing her nose. Papa often makes her cry."

CHAPTER VI.

THREE, four days have passed, and Joan and Wolferstan have not met again. The occasions on which the governess of a house and its men visitors meet are not so numerous as not to be easily avoided, when avoidance is the object on both sides. Luncheon and the drawing-room, during the short space of time that elapses between the men's issuing from dinner and bed-time, are the only neutral ground on which there is any likelihood of their coming into contact; and since the day of their meeting

Wolferstan has not appeared at luncheon, nor has Joan set foot in the drawing-room. A week ago this would have been to her but a small privation. To be found by the entering ladies meekly seated in a corner with her stitching; to be civilly nodded to by all, and fitfully talked to by some; to be the mark for the stealthy stares and small civilities of such scions of commerce or waifs of fashion as Mr. Smith Deloraine's *chef*, or his wife's face attract to the house, have always seemed to Joan joys not difficult to forego. Gratitude alone, for the kind-heartedness which would fain lure her from the loneliness which she in reality so much prefers, has induced her to bear this melancholy little caricature of the pleasures of society. And now a motive stronger than gratitude is pulling the other way; fastening her, through the silent evening, to her stiff arm-chair and her school-room table. Her secession from the company is, as indeed she had foreseen, the occasion of

much voluble surprise, and of many teasing questions on the part of the children.

"Mamma quite expects you, really," says Faustine, with condescending reassurance. "Miss White used hardly ever to go down, mamma scarcely ever asked her; but she often asks you, does not she?"

"You will have to go down on Sunday," says Rupert, with grave exultation, leaning his elbows on the table, and grasping his red cheeks with his hands, like an ugly mediæval cherub; "you will lose your dinner if you do not. Oh, I wish it was Sunday now! we are going to play 'Consequences' in the evening! mamma says so. When I am a grown-up gentleman I shall play 'Consequences' every night."

Joan shudders. It seems, however, that the children's remonstrances are the only ones to which she is likely to be subjected. No one else appears to take any note of her absence. It passes quite without remark.

Before giving it up she had held lightly her little glimpse of human society, her taste of social intercourse, but now that she has let it go she misses it. She had called it a tax and a hardship while it lasted, and now that it is gone she looks back on it with something akin to regret. The only variety that she now has—the only ease from children's lessons, children's quarrels, children's point-blank questions, children's mighty mirth, is what is to be afforded by her own uneasy thoughts. All day long she prays, with irritated nerves and chafed temper, for the children's bed-time; and when it is come, she wishes them back again. Their most probing questions, their most ear-piercing noises are preferable to this silent school-room, with empty chairs stiffly set, with two candles sleepily, solemnly flaring on the square table, with even the cheerful birds asleep, preferable to the company of her own thundering heart.

Heavily, heavily the days tread past; each

hour stretched and strained, undivided even by the kindly barrier of night, for sleep—worthy sleep, at least—has gone from her. Out of doors the sun shines bravely; the hot wind rollicks with the tree tops; the little heaven-coloured butterflies flit, and the roses redly blow. But scarce ever now does Joan cross the house threshold, though it is summer—summer at its ripest and last. The unnatural confinement makes her flag indeed; her who has ever been greedy of the fresh clean air, who has never shrunk from God's sharpest breezes. But yet she perseveres.

We ask whatever Gods there be, not to lead us into temptation. How can we expect them to hear us if we ourselves usurp their functions and lead ourselves in? What security has she that on any day, at any moment, she may not meet him—come face to face with him in the garden paths? Twice from her window has she seen him sauntering

beneath the garden trees; once alone, with face in dishabille, smileless and careworn; once in the possession of the children, dragged three ways at once; roughly caressed and fought over by their importunate arms and differing wills. For the last few days she has lost the power of reading. It is impossible to her to fix her thoughts. In the middle of a paragraph she becomes conscious that, involuntarily, her own attention has escaped her; that she has lost the thread of argument or narrative. Against her strongest resolves—in despite of her most potent efforts —she finds that she is listening—listening always—listening for a voice, a footfall. At any moment she may meet him on the stairs —in the passages? At any moment the children's eager hands may arrest him in passing; may again drag him over the threshold of her domain. At any moment he may again be standing by the window framed by the clematis flowers, and looking

at her with the reluctant dejection of his gray eyes.

Even if otherwise she might succeed in forgetting him for a few moments, the children would not let her: they are always talking of him; bringing her snatches of his speech, analysing his features, wrangling over their places in his esteem, and over his superiority in beauty and general attractiveness to their father, and their other standards of male excellence. A dull excitement, pleasureless and remorseful, burns, with fire ever alight, in pulse and vein; an excitement that slays appetite and wastes flesh; and against which, common sense and conscience level their arms in vain.

It is Saturday now; a sultry leaden-coloured Saturday; and lessons are drawing towards a close. To-day it seems to her that the function has been unusually trying. Whether the fault lies in the irritability of her own temper which makes her sway both less just

and more slack than is its wont, or in her disciples' own innate depravity, the fact remains. Rupert has been very naughty; and has been discovered poking up with a long sharp stick, secreted for the purpose, Montacute out of the depths of a chair where he was lying buried—deaf and blind to all outer sounds and sights—away with the Volscians at Corioli. And Montacute himself has been not quite so good as usual, though his wickedness, when compared with that of his brother and sister, is of so pale a cast as hardly to merit the name. He has insisted on stopping dead short in the middle of the daily Bible reading; and of consequently bringing the whole file to a stand-still, in order to explain at great length with flaming cheeks and indignant eyes, what the Romans would have done in a similar case.

The hour of release is now at hand. Last lines of exercises are being written, last columns of spelling learnt; and Joan—her

attention for the moment not claimed—is leaning back in her chair with tiredly flushed cheeks and closed eyes, when suddenly a quick knock comes at the door. Is this the answer to her fevered listening? Is this the sound that for five long days her unwilling ear has been strained to catch? In a moment she is sitting bolt upright again, with head turned, and eyes fastened on the door. She is trying to give permission to enter, but her voice trembles so much that she cannot depend upon it.

"Say 'Come in,'" she says, in a hurried whisper to Faustine; and Faustine, nothing loth, complies.

The door opens to disclose—not Anthony—why, indeed, should it be he?—is anything more unlikely?—but Anthony's wife. At sight of the children she makes a face of disappointment and disgust.

"You are still in full swing?" she says, putting in her elaborate head, which is im-

mediately followed by her body and her fine lawny gown; "I must have miscalculated; I flattered myself that I should have found these lambkins dismissed;—no, my little dears" (holding out a prohibitory hand towards Faustine who is confidently advancing), "let me beg of you not to come any nearer. I assure you that I look much better at a distance; all fine natural objects do; believe me, I am quite real—there is no deception about me—but I have a foolish prejudice against being felt and pommeled."

Faustine stops, abashed by the unwonted snub; but Rupert calls out lustily from his desk, in his boldest bragging voice:

"Where is Colonel Wolferstan? I like Colonel Wolferstan!"

"Do you indeed?" replies Lalage, distrustfully eying her three opponents; "how nice for him!—he has gone out fishing, but he will soon be back, and then you can pommel him as much as you please."

As she speaks, she draws the chair from which Joan has just risen—the only elbow-chair in the room—to the open window, and sinks composedly into it; having previously arranged a foot-stool for her feet.

"My mind is thrown on its haunches," she says, drawing a luxurious long sigh of ease; "do you know that sensation?—you will not be surprised at it when I tell you that I am fresh from a *tête-à-tête* with the millionaire: I always fall a prey to these *chétif* unfinished little men: I suppose it invigorates them to look at anything so large and well-grown; I never went to a ball in my life that I was not at once beset by all the pigmies in the room. Now that I come to think of it, I have never in my life been offered affection or admiration worthy the name, by anything over four feet high!"

Joan's only answer is to glance expressively towards the children, who are listening with wide ears and over-opened eyes, in that pre-

ternatural stillness assumed by them when they think that they are overtaking something not intended for them to hear. But Lalage pays no heed.

"I might be there still," she says, beginning to laugh complacently, "but for a delicate stroke of finesse; really it was an inspiration —one can call it nothing else; and you are so good-natured—I am sure you will not mind."

"Am I so good-natured?" says Joan, flushing vexedly; "you tell me so, but I assure you that I am not at all conscious of deserving the accusation."

"Oh yes, you are," replies Lalage lightly; "and so am I for the matter of that; but mine is perhaps of a more passive type—more of St. James's kind: 'Depart in peace; be ye warmed and fed.' I like to leave the details of the 'warming and feeding' to other people!"

"But do the other people like it?" asks

Joan, with an indignant inflexion; cheeks still hot, and eyes sparkling.

"If they do not they must leave it alone!" replies Lalage, with airy good temper; "but to return; I am sure you do not mind really, considering the straits I was in, and that I positively saw no other outlet; I told him" (laughing again)—"it really was very inventive of me on the spur of the moment—that I knew that you expected him to go out walking with you; I said that you liked an escort, that you were very timid and afraid of bulls; are you? I dare say that you are; I am!"

Joan does not reply; perhaps because, at the moment, she is with look and gesture dismissing the children; for whose young minds she thinks the present lesson in candour and veracity hardly improving.

They go reluctantly; Faustine last, and most unwillingly; with slowly dragging feet and ears pricked to the last.

"I will not deny, of course," pursues Mrs.

Wolferstan ingenuously, "that it was one word for you, and two for myself; but still it was one word for you. I think it a thousand pities that you should not have more opportunities of meeting!"

"Do you?" says Joan dryly. "You are very good, I am sure."

"You mean that I am very officious," says Lalage philosophically; "at any rate, I only do as I would be done by. If I were free" (with a sigh and a yawn) "I should think any one a benefactor who manœuvred a country walk with a million and a half of money for me; but" (sighing) "no one ever did!"

"And I hope that no one ever will for me again," replies Joan, laughing shortly, and trying to get the better of her irritation; "I really am not worthy of these golden opportunities!"

"I have had my head in the noose," says Lalage shrewdly, shaking her head; "*you* have not. Take my word for it, that far the

most tolerable marriages—it is a detestable institution at best—but far the most tolerable are those in which there can be no talk of high *falutin*, in which nothing is expected of you; there is nothing in the world so fatiguing as to be called upon in every-day life for high-flying sentiments and emotions that you have not got, and could not get for love or money; it is the one thing that makes me feel shy and sneaky!" She pauses out of breath, and Joan maintains her attitude of silent listening. "I never shall forget," resumes Mrs. Wolferstan presently, with a smile of amusement, "how embarrassed I felt, when shortly after we married, Anthony came to me one day with a very long face, and suggested that we should try to be all in all to each other!—he did not pretend" (laughing) "that it would be easy; but he was anxious that we should make the experiment. It takes a good deal to put me out of countenance; but I was then. I laughed in

his face; I really did—out of sheer nervousness."

Joan has turned aside, and affects to be occupied in adjusting the canaries' groundsel.

"I should think that he did not repeat the experiment," she says in a very low voice, and with quivering lips.

"Not he!" replies Lalage carelessly; "he has far too much *savoir vivre;* and besides, he does not like being laughed at. You might laugh Anthony out of anything—out of a belief in his own identity!"

She has risen as she speaks, and is walking towards the door.

"Well, *au revoir!*" she says gaily. "I have told him to meet you at the garden gate; he has gone to fetch his goloshes" (making a face). "Keep him waiting as long as you like! What does it matter!—a million and a half of money will not be kept waiting often through life, you may depend."

With a shrug she disappears.

A quarter of an hour later, Joan is walking slowly down one of the park drives. Around her her squad of disciples ; beside her the escort so ingeniously foisted upon her ; and ahead of her three joyful large dogs, who, their lives being chiefly spent in the retirement of a kennel, have manifested such a robust mirth at the prospect of a temporary release, as has almost defeated their own object and baulked all efforts to set them free. They are galloping ahead now, in such spirits as does one good to see, sniffing, slobbering, offering each other mysterious insults.

Desperately sad as is Joan's heart, she cannot refrain from laughing at the sight of Mr. Smith nervously fencing them off with small tightly furled umbrella, and crying "Down! down!" in timid imperative ; while the dogs, misled by his gestures, take them for a challenge to play, and gladly accept them as such.

"They are not muzzled!" he says, eying them distrustfully ; "are you aware of that?

Do you think it safe to allow them to go unmuzzled during this hot weather?"

Joan is saved the trouble of an answer, by Monty, who, having been a prey all the morning to an arithmetical whimsy, now breaks in with his usual irrelevance.

"Miss Dering, there are ten feet and fifty toes here!"

"Are there?" says Joan, startled, and looking expectantly up to heaven, and round about the landscape. "Where?"

"*I* mean, that we have them," he answers, looking very eager. "Yours, two; Rupert's, four; Faustine's, six; Mr. Smith's, eight; and mine, ten; and then your toes, ten; Rupert's, twenty; Faustine's, thirty; Mr. Smith's, forty; and mine, fifty!"

"Say it again, Monty!" cries Rupert, in shrill delight. "Yours, two; Miss Dering's, four," etc., etc.

How long this repetition continues Joan is hardly aware. She would not be sorry were

it to be maintained during the whole walk, as it makes a cover for her own abstraction, throws a shield of protection over her thoughts, which, bitter as they were before, have gained a greatly deeper tinge of bitterness since her talk with Lalage. Ere long, however; she is regretfully aware that the topic of the numerical strength of the company's toes has lost its interest, is aware also that Mr. Smith is addressing her in tones of diffident cheerfulness.

"I am very fond of ladies' society," he is saying with an accent of shy confidence; "no doubt you have perceived it by my manner; I have always much preferred it to that of my own sex; I have never had much in common with them; I am no sportsman!"

"No?" says Joan, rousing herself; "then I am afraid" (glancing in the direction of her old home, and smiling rather sadly) "that the Dering covers are wasted upon you!"

"Quite so," he replies readily; "it is a reflection that I myself have often made; I have never had any turn for field sports, or athletic exercises, and I am afraid" (glancing with timid appeal at his companion's face) "that it is rather late in life to begin now; is not it?—though of course" (sighing profoundly) "I am aware how desirable it would be in my position."

Joan is heavily silent. A sense of fate's irony, of life's crookedness, is grasping her heart and pressing upon her spirits. On the one hand, this puny weakling, weighed to earth by the sense of his own good things; oppressed by the consciousness of the thoroughbred horses he is afraid to ride; of the pheasants he is afraid to shoot; of the rivers he cannot fish; and the acres he cannot walk over; on the other hand, Anthony!

"I am sure that I have no desire to evade the responsibilities that my position entails," continues the millionaire presently, in a

dispirited voice; switching with his little umbrella at the ragwort heads, "and I hope in time to become more reconciled to a residence in the country; but, as far as pleasure goes, I cannot help thinking that the advantages of a landed proprietor are a good deal over-rated!"

They have left the carriage drive, and have been sauntering with the languor of August upon them across the park, to where a belt of full foliaged trees is throwing its comfortable broad shadow on the long bracken and the hot, short grass. Joan has sat down; and the others have grouped themselves round her; man, children, dogs. Joan herself is sitting passive and inert; her indifferent eyes fixed on the level landscape about her—it is as flat as a Dutch cheese—and on the lanky chimneys, that, volleying dirty smoke, stand along the line of the horizon. But the children's active minds can be content with no such quiescence. The seat they have

chosen is beneath a wild cherry tree; and Faustine is collecting the little cade cherries, vinegar-sour, and the stones picked clean by the birds; and is, with precocious interest, casting her own matrimonial horoscope with them.

"Soldier
Sailor
Tinker
Tailor
Gentleman
Apothecary
Ploughboy
Thief!"

Displeased with the issue, which is invariably "Apothecary," she further consults the oracle as to what manner of equipage will be likely to be hers in after life.

"Big carriage
Little carriage
Dung cart
Wheelbarrow!"

But as the answer to this query is hardly more satisfactory than the other; no efforts being able to induce it to be other than

"Dung-cart," she throws the stones away in a pet.

"It is nonsense!" she cries angrily; "a rich lady could not marry an apothecary, and drive in a dung-cart! it is a stupid game!"

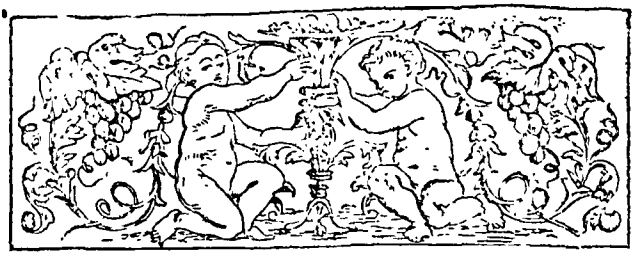
"Let us try Miss Dering," cries Rupert noisily, stretching out his hand to make a fresh collection. The incantation begins again.

"Soldier
Sailor
Tinker
Tailor."

They have all gathered round to watch the result. The children are laying their blonde heads together. Even Mr. Smith and the dogs have advanced somewhat nearer to the centre of interest. It looks a sociable little encampment in the woodland gloom; and so it seems to a passer-by, who is taking a short cut through the coppice, from the river at the back to the house in front; a passer-by with a fishing-rod, a twine of ingenious gaudy

flies round his hat, and a pair of handsome envious eyes.

"Colonel Wolferstan!" cries Rupert, catching sight of him; jumping up and running to meet him; "we are playing 'Soldier, Sailor,' it is such fun! Miss Dering is to marry a thief and have a big carriage; it has come so three times! Faustine has only an apothecary and a dung-cart; she is so cross!"



CHAPTER VII.

DAY is over now; and night has taken back the reins into her ebon coloured hands; though indeed, in the fair tinting of a summer night, there is not much kinship with that hue in which we have painted our bogy, the devil; and our enemy, death. The children are in bed and asleep, Joan visited them a while ago; and with hand shading the candle from their shut eyes, marvelled inwardly whether these silent flushed cherubs could be indeed the same as the three wakeful little demons who, but

yesterday, thrust half-pence up each other's noses, and probed her with indelicate questions as to the amount of her income, and her matrimonial probabilities. She has now gone back to her domain, and is sitting there in the dark, alone and idle. She has thrown herself on the floor, beside the open window; and with arms laid on the sill, and head resting upon them, couches there in utter stillness. Were even the candles alight—could even they see her—she would be ashamed to adopt such a stricken attitude; but they are out. There is nothing but the comfortable darkness that tells no tales, and is surprised at nothing.

Downstairs they are dancing—dancing to a piano in the hall. Faintly, but yet clearly, the sounds of the oft-repeated valse come merrily stealing through the shut doors, and along the passages. Joan does not even lift her heavy head to listen. What good news or heart-lightening could any air bring her?

An utter discouragement of soul is pressing her to the earth; pressing down and slaying the gentle valour of her usually steady spirit. What is this ugly chill doubt that, five days ago, began to whisper its sickly message in her ear, and is now calling and shrieking all day long—all night long—out loud in her heart? Has she indeed done well by him? Has she indeed been to him the benefactress, that, for the last two years and a half, she has so complacently called herself? Was it well done—and who but she has done it? who but she?—to thrust him into the arms of this woman; under the icy breath of whose cold little laugh, all his faint struggles upwards, all his hesitating aspirations after the spiritual and the ideal, wither, perished and death-frozen; under whose fostering care the earthy and the animal in him will wax to as overgrown a bulk as that of noisome snails and newts, in a dark dank place? Is not even her own smirched name but a light

thing in comparison of the sensual smirched soul with which she herself has thrown him into daily—hourly—life-long contact?

She presses her forehead harder still down upon her small wrists, until the strong pressure is painful, and pinches her lips tight together, to keep in the pain-cry that seems as if it must issue from them. In this universal uprooting of belief—this ominous trembling and shuddering of the very foundations of her being, a profound distrust of even the purity of her own motives fiercely assails her. Was it wholly and solely for his sake that she, with so obstinate a roughness, thrust him away from her? Was not there mixed with it a morbid pride on her own account—a morbid pride, that because it could not give all, would give nothing? And now, and now, though she sees his wound gaping wide and bleeding always, hers must be the very last hand in all the world that can offer to staunch it.

And when he is gone and his sufferings are removed from her sight, she will know that somewhere else they are going on always, until the sharpness of pain is exchanged for the worse numbness of deterioration. Her tears have come thick and scalding, without her knowing it. They are flooding her slight arms and her little folded hands. Great straining sobs are shaking her slender body and climbing her throat. They must even make her hearing thick, for a low tap that came at the door some moments ago, has to be repeated twice before she hears it. Then, indeed, in utter haste and fear, she lifts her prone head; and shakes the strands of wet hair out of her streaming eyes. Who is it that thus inopportunely seeks her?—that, in this her time of freedom, when she is thus utterly defenceless and off guard, cruelly intrudes himself upon her? And in what plight is she to meet any curious face? any prying light? She will make no answer at

all; and so perhaps the unwelcome visitor will conclude that the room is empty, and will go away.

So she lies quiet as any partridge in a furrow. But the knock is a third time repeated; and since it is still unanswered, the door opens softly; a river of light streams in—a river which does not reach her, as she is at the farthest end of the room; and on that river, lit by that sudden flame, a man's tall figure — a man's enquiring face make themselves seen.

"Is there anyone here?" asks the man's voice uncertainly. Joan makes no answer. Even had she not resolved to be mute, that voice, striking in so opportunely among her thoughts, would have made her dumb. "Is there any one here?" he repeats, rather more loudly; "surely" (straining his eyes into the gloom), "surely I see some one!"

Concealment is no longer to be hoped for. Joan has risen to her feet.

"Yes, I am here!" she answers in a voice which she tries to believe is tolerably firm and untearful, trusting to the shortness of her sentence not to betray her.

"You are in the dark!" cries Anthony in a tone of surprise, advancing gropingly with hands outstretched before him, a pace or two nearer to her.

"So it seems!" she answers, trying to laugh.

"Were you asleep?" he asks, and by the noise that he makes in stumbling over an intervening chair, she knows that he is still approaching her. "I knocked three times, but you did not answer!"

"Am I wanted?" cries Joan hastily, evading his question and answering it by another; "does any one want me?"

"They are dancing!" he says, still feeling his way gingerly along by the table; helping himself on by the landmarks of Joan's desk, Monty's high chair, Faustine's work-box.

"And they want me to play for them?" (in a tone of consternation, raising frightened fingers to her own face, to feel her wet eyelashes and her hot and blistered cheeks).

"No, they do not; they want you to dance, they are all dancing; I was the only person that was not: that was why they sent me I suppose. I would not have come" (in a tone of explanation and apology) "if they had not sent me."

"To dance!" repeats Joan, in a voice of hurried apprehension; "oh, it is out of the question!—quite out of the question! I—I—I am not dressed!"

"Are not you?—well, of course" (with a nervous short laugh) "I must take your word for that!—oh, thank God! here are the matches."

There is a little scraping sound; and in a moment the candles are re-lit. The vanished light has leapt joyfully back again, driving before it the safe, convenient darkness. The

direction of her voice has guided him very accurately.

They are standing close beside each other. There is therefore no longer any use in feigning. It would be labour lost, now that the disfigured face, but now so blackly veiled, has sprung into sudden clearness beneath his searching eyes. She does not even attempt to turn away or cover it with her hands. Her long arms hang listlessly down by her sides; and, in a sort of desperation, she lifts her swollen eyes with calmness to his. There is a moment's silence. Anthony's look is taking in, with a shocked astonishment, all the details of her appearance; the disordered hair—all the more disordered for being naturally of the sleek, unfluffy sort; the swelled eyelids, the crimsoned nostrils and cheeks, and the puckered lips. At last, and when she is beginning to feel that his scrutiny is no longer endurable, and that at any price she must free herself from it, he speaks in a

low voice which only its extreme lowness saves from the discredit of being shaken and trembling.

"You were not asleep then?"

"No, I was awake."

There is another pause; broken again by Anthony.

"And is this the way in which you generally spend your evenings?" he asks abruptly.

"No, that it is not!" she cries emphatically, while a beam of eager light shoots out from the depths of her drowned eyes: "please do not go away with that idea; do not think of me as such a miserably poor creature. It is not once in a twelvemonth that such a thing happens; if you had come yesterday—if you came to-morrow—you would find me rationally occupied like any one else; oh why" (with an accent of impatience), "if you must come at all—why did not you come yesterday or to-morrow instead of to-night?"

His eyes are wandering round the room, which looks more of a prison and less of a bower, now that its plain furniture, its globes and maps, are indicated by the little spires of light of the two composite candles, than when they were flooded by the general wash of the royal sunbeams.

"Do you spend all your life within these four walls?" he asks. "Do you never mix with *them?*" (nodding his head in the direction whence the sound of the merrily jigging company rises in muffled mirth).

"Sometimes," she answers evasively; "it is as it happens—now and then."

"The children tell me," he says, speaking slowly, and shifting his position to one in which the fullest light the niggard candles give fall upon her, "that formerly—until quite lately—until a few days ago, in fact—you always used to make your appearance every evening in the drawing-room, after dinner."

"The children have very long tongues," she says petulantly, with an embarrassed laugh.

"Tell me," he cries, stepping yet nearer to her, and fixing his gray eyes searchingly upon her, as if he would, in her despite, pierce through the poor mask of her troubled disfigured face, and reach the verities of her clean soul—"Tell me, is it a coincidence, or have I anything to say to it? We were always honest with each other, were not we? Is there any reason why we should not be honest still?"

A tide of carnation, even more painfully vivid than that which tears and friction have already brought there, washes over Joan's cheeks and little throat; but she lifts her head spiritedly.

"There is no honesty in the matter," she answers, with a quiet dignity; "it is a question that you have as little right to ask as I to answer!"

"Then I withdraw it," he answers gravely;

"but, all the same" (shaking his head meaningly), "it is not only asked but answered. Well!" (turning slowly away, and beginning to walk towards the door), "you know best—you always know best; except once" (lowering his voice and speaking quickly, yet emphatically)—"once I am very sure that you did not know best! I think that now you know it too."

He has reached the door. The handle is already turning in his fingers, when he is aware that she stands again beside him, and is lifting her charming face with a look of pure friendliness, angel mild, to his.

"You know," she says in a quiet moved voice, "that it is not from any ill-will that I bear you. If I could do you any good—if I could be of any use or profit to you at any time of my life or yours—indeed I would not spare labour or trouble to be so; but you know that I cannot—you know, as well as I do, that I cannot."

For a moment he looks at her uncertainly without answering; then taking his resolution in both hands speaks.

"You were always a just woman," he says gravely; "to other people you were merciful, too; not to me. No" (shaking his head), "I cannot say that to me you were merciful; but until now you were always just—now you are not just!"

She is no longer looking full and directly at him. She has turned away, and is standing with her head drooped a little on her chest, and her fair hands clasped.

"I do not understand you!" she says in a low voice.

"I have done nothing," he goes on, with gathering excitement, "to deserve being shunned and ostracised—will you persist" (speaking in a hurried lowered voice, while a dull red wave of shame rushes all over his face)—"will you persist in confounding me with that most unhappy madman, who, not

well knowing what he did for raging pain, forced himself into your presence like a burglar one midnight, two years and a half ago? No!" (seeing her put up her hands with a sudden gesture of prohibition and fear)—"no—do not be afraid. I know as well as you do, that it is a subject that will not bear handling; but in God's name put out of your head that it was *I*!—it was a most miserable madman that had taken my shape!—it was not I."

"I know it," she answers in a stifled and hardly audible voice; "I have always known it!"

He draws a heavy long breath, and passes his hand over his forehead, and the sweep of his smooth hair.

"But as far as *I*—I myself—the real I—am concerned," he goes on more quietly, but still with a profound and serious eagerness, "what harm, pray, have I ever done you? If we come to reckon up accounts,"

looking at her steadfastly and with a piteous resentment in his eyes, "as to which of us had wrought the other the most woe, I should not have much doubt, for my part, as to which would come out creditor! It will not do to hark back to old times—I know that as well as you! Do not tell me" (in a rough voice of passionate prohibition) "that between us and those dear days a door is inexorably shut that not all our joint strength can henceforth open ever so little. Who, better than I, knows it? But cast one look back into your memory—that" (with a half sneer) "will not injure you—and tell me which of my sins it is that has called down upon me this galling punishment?—to be shunned by *you*" (with an accent of indignant melancholy)—"you, that were ever so tolerant of even the uncongenial and the wearisome—to be shunned by even *you!*"

She hesitates in a pained confusion; divided between the impossibility of honest speech,

and the cruelty of silence. She oscillates so long between the two, that he, unanswered, in his impatience speaks again.

"To which of us, pray," he asks impetuously, and with a baffling directness, "do you think that a half hour spent in each other's company would be dangerous?—to yourself?" (with a gently ironic accent). "Well, no; I think that your passionless high soul—that your well-governed, quietly-beating heart would come scatheless out of a peril a good deal greater than that poor one! Is it for *me* that you are afraid? Well, then, that is my affair; and I tell you that I am willing—most willing—to run the risk."

She makes a gesture as though she would interrupt him; but he goes on hastily.

"Do you think that, like the Bourbons, I have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing? Have these last bitter two years and a half done absolutely nothing for me, in the way of control and discipline? Am I still an over-

grown infant that is not to be trusted to play with fire, and out of whose reach must be moved every knife with which he could possibly do himself a mischief?"

"It is you that are unjust now," she says very gently, lifting her brave blue eyes—not wet now, but lit by their own steadfast light—to the restless flashing of his. "I have no distrust of you, nor have I shown any; why should I be in such haste to suspect evil where there is none? But" (with a long low sigh, and flushing faintly) "apart from any question of you or me, you must know that since—since—well, you know since when—society has but small pleasure for me; always, always I am ill at ease, and feel as if I had no right to be there. While here" (looking slowly round with calm lifted face), "when I am between these four quiet walls, my past does not trouble me; I know that my future is in God's good keeping; I have nothing but my tranquil present to occupy me."

"*Tranquil!*" he repeats with a sarcastic accent, glancing meaningly at the cheeks which still show traces of her tears: "your tranquillity wears an odd dress!"

"It is true," she answers with composure; "as the healthiest body ails sometimes, so, in the evenest smoothest life, there comes sometimes a spell of soul-sickness, and" (with a long sigh) "I have had such a spell to-night!"

There is a pause. The door has all this time been left ajar; and through it is now heard the frou-frou of silk along the passage.

"What! burning the midnight oil still?" cries a rather loud, gay voice, as its owner, pushing open the door, stands, large and *riante*, in a gown too costly for her husband's light purse, and with shoulders heaving, as of old, perilously far out of her distanced clothes, in the aperture before them.

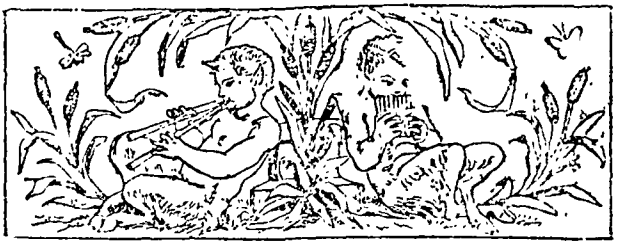
"*You* here, Tony!" (with handsome eyebrows lifted, and a twinkle of amusement in

her merry cold eyes); "so *you* have found out this little Goshen too, have you? I am so sorry, because I know that now you will never be out of it; and I wanted to keep it as a little private Ebenezer of my own."

"I came with a message from Mrs. Smith Deloraine," replies Anthony, who has come forward to meet his wife, paling a little, and trying to place himself so as to shield as much as possible Joan and her still disfigured face from the mirthful keenness of his wife's look. "Were not you amused?" he adds hastily. "Are you going to bed?"

"Of course I am going to bed!" she answers, with an honest and unchecked yawn. "I should have been in bed two hours ago, if I had not been misled by a Will-o'-the-wisp of supper; some one said that there was to be supper. I will never believe in *on dits* again. After all, there was nothing but sherry and sandwiches! Imagine sitting up till one in the morning for sherry and sandwiches—is

not it too humiliating? Well, good-night!" (nodding good-humouredly: then, as she reaches the door, casting a diverted glance in the direction of her husband) — "turn him out if he begins to bore you! He is apt to be long winded sometimes; are not you, Tony?"



CHAPTER VIII.

ONE after one the hot days race past. The summer, that begins with a gentle trot, ends with a fleet gallop. Our pleasures always pass us at full gallop, and our pains on all-fours. Would God we could know certainly that there were otherwhere a world, and that we could come at it—where the pains galloped and the pleasures crawled! Perhaps if there were, we too should change our natures, and perversely cry "Stay" where we now say "Make haste!" and "Make haste" where we now cry "Stay!"

August is nearly run out; August, the last of summer's three poor children. Even if you amalgamate spring with her, she has but three. Alas! how can we help heavily sighing, we that are not fox-hunters, when we think of how many degrees of frost and feet of snow—of how many knife-like winds and stinging rains—we shall have to wade and fight through before we catch sight of another. Joan has uneasily wished the days away; and her wish, like all our foolish unthrifty wishes for the annihilation of our scant time, is rushing to its fulfilment. The Smith Deloraine party is on the eve of breaking up. There is only one whole day to intervene, before it melts like a snowball on a hob; before its members, brought into casual juxtaposition for a fortnight, whirl off from each other, north, south, east, west. Joan has wished for its breaking up. Therefore she must needs be now content. But when we have our wishes in our arms, they seldom

look either so large or so handsome as they did when we saw them, magnified by distance and mist, standing on the far-off mountain-tops of hope. Usually we find some ugly scar on their faces, some malformation in their shape, that puts us out of humour with them. Perhaps you would say that Joan herself is looking a little out of humour with her wish this morning, as she leans, dressed to go out, in a wide coarse hat and clean scant calico gown, against the school-room window-frame. She is running over in her mind the incidents of the past three weeks; as once at Helmsley she had run over those of a somewhat similar space of time. Certainly the disagreeables of this present period are by no means inferior, in either size or number, to that of the former one.

They are walking now in gloomy procession before her mental eye. She has had five walks with Mr. Smith; one accidental; two quasi-accidental; two ingeniously manœuvred

by Lalage: walks during which he has dwelt with ever-growing emphasis, hotter blushes, and a more ominous meaning in his pale eyes, on his own fondness for ladies' society, and the loneliness and unsuitability of Dering Castle for the occupancy of a single inmate. She shudders; much as she used to shudder at the thought of Micky Brand; then laughs. "What have I done to deserve two such admirers?"

Six times she has come suddenly face to face with Anthony, in garden, alley, or corridor. Out of those six times, twice has he passed her with lowered eyes in uneasy haste; twice have the children fallen like wolves upon him, and hindered her from hearing a tone of either his own or her voice throughout the interview; twice he has found Mr. Smith in her company, and has passed her with a silent angry bow.

She has spent five evenings in the drawing-room; five evenings made for ever hot and

sore, even in memory, by the consciousness that pervaded them of the existence of a jocose conspiracy among the company for throwing her into the millionaire's society: a conspiracy not so patent as to be very ill-bred, or to become apparent to the dull-witted object of it; but plain as the sun in heaven to her; and resented with an impotent wrath that helps her not at all: a conspiracy to which she can plainly see, by his sullen brows and averted eyes, that Anthony thinks her a willing party. Though she is quite alone, she puts up her hands to cover her face, as if to hide even from the bullfinch's sly round eye the indignant flush that has stained it at this humiliating recollection. Nor are her troubles wholly in the past. There is one last, worst one still ahead of her; one in which all the others are to culminate. Is not to-day—this last day—to be devoted to a pleasure excursion to Dering to see the "improvements?"

"For Heaven's sake make no difficulty about coming!" Lalage has cried lamentably overnight; "the children are to be of the party, and I know that it will be hell broke loose if you are not by to put a hook in their nose, and a bridle in their jaws; and besides" (with a laugh), "you are the pivot on which the whole entertainment turns; is not she, Tony?"

And so it comes to pass, that in the fresh and early morning Joan stands at the window, leaden-hearted, waiting to be summoned.

"Monty is ill, and unable to share the general festivity. Joan has just bidden him good-bye, and has left him sitting up in his small bed, with one little feverish arm embracing a basin, and a large Bible open at Leviticus before him.

They are off now—three carriages full.

"Do you mind sitting with your back to the horses?" cries Lalage gaily, as she

establishes herself luxuriously in her corner, with air-cushion, dust-cloak, and sunshade. "Oh, do say that you do not! When I was a girl I always used to pretend that it made me sick. It adds very much to one's comfort in life being able to feign a few diseases; there are very few from *angina pectoris* downwards that I can't simulate at a pinch!"

They are off now. The buggy, with the host and Colonel Wolferstan, spinning on ahead; the stately barouche, with the hostess, Lalage, Joan, and the children, bowling smoothly after; and the waggonette, with Mr. Smith and the odds and ends of the party, bringing up the rear.

Away they go: the bright harness throwing back the morning beams; the showy horses stepping out; Rupert perched on the box between coachman and footman, shouting out pieces of shrill information to Faustine inside; Faustine holding up her parasol and spreading the crisp circumference of her

flounces all over Joan's modest calico gown. Away they go: a merry young sun, not yet potent enough to be feared, is lending his own laugh to the close-shorn harvest fields and the heavily-clad green trees. Delicate morning airs are ruffling about them. Their spirits are unjaded, and their limbs untired. But this is at the beginning.

At the end of the twelve miles drive things are rather different. The sun has ceased to smile, and begun to smite. The refreshing gusts have lain down for their noonday sleep. The dust has found its way up their noses, and their knees are growing cramped.

It is perhaps well for Joan that her attention is distracted from pensively dwelling on the old recollections and associations that each new half-mile calls forth, by the necessity of a stringent attention to Faustine, who, having grown tired of the confinement of her position, is beginning to jump up and down tiresomely on the seat, and to swing her legs to

and fro, pendulum fashion, against Lalage's indignant shins.

"Miss Dering!" cries Rupert from the box, in a voice of great glory and exultation, "Mitchell says that we shall see Dering Castle at the next turn. Oh, is not it fun? Come up here, Fausty! there is plenty of room. James, is not there plenty of room for Fausty too?" (appealing confidentially to the footman, who indeed is the same one from whom he has imbibed that ignoble rhyme about Mr. Lobsky, which Joan has so vainly tried to erase from his memory).

Joan's heart has sprung to her mouth; her limbs are trembling. For the moment she must leave Lalage and Faustine to fight it out as best they may. Her trembling voice can be lifted in neither exhortation nor reprimand. Here is the turn! Already they are curving round it. In a moment the beloved reverend home will have risen upon her aching sight.

"There it is!" cries Rupert, wildly excited, pointing with one eager fat forefinger; "James, there it is!"

Faustine has sprung up on the seat, and her sharp look is following her brother's.

"Is that it?" she cries, in a contemptuous hold-cheap voice; "it is not near so large as I expected! Why, Miss Dering, you told us that it was such a beautiful house! I call it *hideous!*"

Joan has stood up too. Her blurred and misty gaze is hungrily fixed on the old proud dwelling of her race, but she does not reply to Faustine's taunt. Is this, indeed, the lovely pile—half feudal castle, half old manorial hall—that she had challenged all other counties to beat for stateliness and comfortable beauty?—this, that time and weather had vied in painting with sweet and sober tints; this, that, wrapping its giant ivy cloak around it, had stood calmly bidding the little paltry years go by?

Where, then, is the ivy—the wonder of twenty miles round—that was wont to swathe two of the stout towers, and clasped its long and lovely arms around the old house's venerable body, out of which the casement windows peeped, and the riotous roses laughed summer-long? Never, never again, save in memory's reluctant dreams, will Joan see it any more. It is cut down root and branch; not a twig or a leaf left to show that it once was there. Bare, forlorn, and naked, the towers rise gray against the pale, hot summer sky, shorn of their three centuries' clothing; while out of the Castle's disfigured face the great new windows grin like glaring false teeth in a venerable head, flashing back in malignant mirth the sun's rays from their acres of plate glass.

Joan sinks back again upon the seat; and, turning her head as far as possible away from her fellow-travellers' observation, fixes her brimming eyes on the rolling wheels—on the

whirling dust — on anything that is not Dering. She no longer heeds—she does not even hear any more of the children's jibes and comments. All through the park as they smoothly roll beneath the familiar stag-headed oaks and the glorious spread of the mighty beeches, she is schooling her spirit to bear the purgatory that the next few hours will bring. If this first experience is to be a sample of the rest, it will indeed be a day's pleasuring for her. She has hardly got the better of the lump in her throat, nor has dared to trust her voice in any utterance; when, having passed through the last gate, they draw up at the grand entrance, to find that Mr. Smith, who has taken advantage of a short cut across the park to get ahead of them, already stands waiting, small, nervous, but hospitably triumphant, to receive his guests under the lofty arched and scutcheoned door, whence the obsolete Dering lion still looks down grimly ironical.

The moment that they come to a stand-still, the host advances, hastily pushing himself before his own new mammoth footmen, and while his near-sighted eyes appear to see no one but Joan, he stretches out his hand to her, crying with tremulous gaiety: "Welcome back to Dering!"

From the brisk patness with which this greeting shoots out, it is clearly an impromptu *fait à loisir* concocted during the twelve miles of waggonette. But she to whom it is addressed is incapable of any answering thanks. Blinded by tears she stumbles silently past him into the hall; only to see that it has been new-floored with Minton tiles, instead of the beloved old oak boards on which her childish feet had played and her girl's feet so often lightly danced.

"Thank Heaven we have reached the promised land at last!" cries Lalage, sweeping in with a large sigh of relief and weariness. "Certainly we have not had much

manna or many quails by the way! I could dispense with the manna, but oh, Mr. Smith, we look to you for the quails! Do you think —oh, do you think that they are likely to be nearly roasted?"

But not even this broad hint as to the state of her appetite can induce Mr. Smith to depart from the programme laid down in his own mind—to see the improvements first, and then to luncheon. Not all Mrs. Wolferstan's heavy sighs and broad innuendoes can persuade him to alter this order of succession. If there can be any gladness in such a case, Joan is glad. Since it must be, by all means let it be at once, so that by and by it may be over. The children, feeling that the bands of discipline are entirely relaxed, and that a general and agreeable condition of licence and anarchy has set in, are already half over the house. Miles away one hears them; opening unintended doors, riding down banisters, teasing long-suffering footmen, chivying

wrathy cats. It has begun. Joan is now well into the purgatorial flames. The first door, sticky with new paint, is thrown open.

"This was the late owner's private room, I am told!—am I not right? I thought I could not do better than follow his example; so now it is mine!"

And so on through the rooms. Joan is not even able to indulge in the poor luxury of silence. It is to her judgment that all the appeals on her taste, that all the calls are made; into her ears that all the stream of complacent volubility is poured. By and by a sort of stupefaction comes to her aid; a dim feeling that this is all a phantasmagoria. This is not her old home, this melancholy mummer masquerading thus gaudily in its Brummagem new clothes; her old home in the richness of its sober colouring, with its ancient stately fittings, so suited to its age and character that they seem to have grown part of it, not to be severed without muti-

lation—with its hangings faded a little by the action of the many summer suns that have filtered through the pleasant casement windows upon them, but mellow and harmonious as the voice with the instrument.

The feeling strengthens as she walks bewildered through the rooms in their new possessor's wake; her feet treading on fire-new carpets, the brightness of whose sprawling flowers and scrolls gets up and boxes the ears; seeing herself centupled in hundreds of Titan mirrors; her eyes aching with the monotonous miles of white paint and tons of gilding that everywhere meet them. Now and again, indeed, the sight of an old friend—a picture—a Grinling Gibbon's chimney-piece—a gem by Cellini—too palpably valuable to be relegated to the lumber-room, even by the most commercial taste, the grossest intelligence—make her start and shiver as one that meets a white-sheeted ghost, but for the most part a kind

numbness comes to her aid. This is a house, and that was a house, but there seem to be no threads in her memory to tie the two ideas together. It is nearly over now. They have returned to the rooms whence they first started. Mr. Smith has been called away to give some order; Joan has sunk down on a chair by the table—both new, of course, and with gilt legs—and is leaning her burning forehead on her hands. Her whole being seems to be one dull ache and bruise. She has only one idea that has any sharpness or distinctness in it, and that is, that she must not cry.

"Do not think me unfeeling," says Lalage, who has subsided into a lounge, her laugh extinguished, and her features solemnised by hunger and boredom, "but self-preservation is the first instinct of our nature, and it is really that, and nothing else, that prompts me, but" (lowering her voice) "do you happen to know whether this little monster

bought your grandfather's cellar as well as everything else? If he did not" (with a heavy sigh and a shrug), "I think he is quite capable of poisoning us with bad champagne and acid sherry at luncheon, and so I tell you fairly."

But at luncheon Joan's soul is draining so bitter a cup that it is of small moment to her what stamp of drink or what manner of food passes her bodily lips. They lunch in the small dining-room in which she and her grandfather used always to dine when they were alone, or had gathered only a few intimates around them. It is travestied indeed, and harlequinised, like the rest of the house; but, alas! the billows of change that have swept over it have not done their work thoroughly enough. One or two old landmarks still sadly emerge, as they say that the church steeples of a drowned city show sometimes on quiet summer evenings above the whelming waves. The old familiar-stamped leather has, indeed,

vanished from the walls. The portrait of Mr. Smith's mother, in cameo Holy Family, and satin gown—a sort of Bowdlerised Mrs. Moberley — now hangs as a grotesque and mismatching pendant to that of her grandfather; but yet his picture is still here, so is his great-armed and high-backed chair, which seems even yet to keep his faint and ghostly spirit shape in its embrace. Her own chair, too. Mr. Smith has with timid insistence begged her to resume it, observing that "it will be like old times to her," and she has obeyed with a limp compliance.

During the whole time that the entertainment lasts—it appears to her very lengthy, and indeed Lalage's appetite is not a thing to be appeased in a hurry—she sits feeling as if the whole thing were a caricature — a dreadful burlesque of her sacred past. She is once again at the head of this familiar board: once again there is around her a sound of gay talk and bubbling laughter: once again

her lifted eyes meet the smile and look of a *vis-à-vis*. But what smile? What look? What *vis-à-vis?* It seems as if her anguished gaze could not help ever raising itself from the little *chétif* reigning king, lost and swallowed up in the embraces of his great chair, to the lofty-statured beloved dead king on the wall above him.

Perhaps it is as well for her—though at the time it seems as if it were the last drop in an already over-brimmed cup—that the children seem resolved to contribute their little mite towards making her days pleasuring at Dering an ineffaceable one from her memory: that Faustine appears determined to follow the example of many of the great and good of all ages, and leave this life by the door of a surfeit; and that Rupert, casting to the winds all sense of the fitness of things, is devoting his young energies to the task of moving the strange footmen from their warranted gravity, by many occult practical

jokes, such as he has often tested the efficacy of upon James and William at home. Not even with the end of luncheon do Joan's trials touch their end. Fresh logs are indeed to be thrown on the purgatorial flames. It is only the scene of her endurance that is to be a little changed. What has been already done inside the house has now to be done outside.

It is now the turn for the gardens and their improvements; nor will their owner take any denial. He is obliged indeed, willy nilly, to take a denial in the case of Mrs. Wolferstan, who declines to be of the party, with a robust and emphatic certainty as to her own inclinations, which precludes pressing.

"You shall tell me all about it when you come back," she says, with an ironical laugh, as soon as the host's back is turned; "as for me, I am already improved off my legs; nature craves repose!—you do not want me

to chaperone you, do you?" (turning to Joan), "no?—I thought not. I assure you that Tony is quite as efficient, and has a very good idea of effacing himself judiciously at the right moment, have not you, Tony?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE heavy windless afternoon is wearing itself away; surely, surely the end must be drawing nigh? It seems to Joan as if she had been walking for many hours, walking along with the same sense of unending ache—of bruised bewilderment—of recognition and non-recognition, as had marked her progress through the house. Is her memory indeed so weak that she feels as if she scarce knew which way to turn in these familiar, unfamiliar grounds, about which she could have confidently made her

way, though blindfold, three years ago? Or is it that the old landmarks have been so wholly and carefully removed and obliterated that she has a sort of blank half feeling of never having been here before? Haltingly, and with wandering puzzled eyes, and short hard breaths, she has asked, one after one, for her old friends. The great double box hedges, old, past the memory of man, and which so stoutly kept off the winter winds from the quiet path that led between them, that in the keenest January blast one might pace there in ease and warmth. They are gone—stubbed up—as being a harbour for slugs.

The yew peacocks, too, and the flame-shaped cypresses that spired darkly heavenwards along the terrace walk. Yes, they too. It is the same throughout. Where the old bowling-green once spread its shaven smoothness a fire-new range of bald and glaring vineries rise; where the stiff parterres spread

their sober variety of sweetness, and the lime-alleys ran, there is now one universal blazing sameness of scentless bedding plants in scrolled and twirly beds; of fat-fleshed foliage-abominations intersected here and there by paths of gaudy-coloured gravels. Where the velvet lawns stretched their centuries of finest turf; great plantations of pert new shrubs, each with a label bigger than itself, now raise their half foot of scanty verdure above the ground as they might round a new built suburban villa. And through them all Joan has walked as one in a dream, stupidly smiling now and then; assenting, commending; Mr. Smith on her right hand, Anthony on her left, and the children everywhere.

But surely she is awake now? Surely this weather-worn, lichen-patterned wall—this old wrought-iron gate are familiar, most familiar to her tired eyes? In a moment they have passed through the gate, and are standing in a still and ancient garden, that reminds one

of nothing so much as of Mrs. Browning's "Lost Bower." Walls, partly of natural rock, all overgrown, overdraped with ivy and loveliest creepers, snap-dragons growing on the top, and lightest grasses bowing in the wind. But no wind gets inside to the favoured flowers and cabbages, to the riotous plenty of the faint monthly roses and the kingly blue larkspurs, and striped-coated carnations. A sense of saintliness, sunshine, holy old-fashioned innocent leisure over the whole place.

"This at least is unchanged!" says Joan, in a slow soft voice, and drawing a long sighing breath; "this is as we left it."

"For the present," cries Mr. Smith briskly; "quite for the present. You know that, as they say, Rome was not built in a day. We are coming to it by and by—by and by."

"What! is not even this to be spared?" cries the girl brokenly, turning her tragic eyes wofully round on the lovely mellow

walls, on the scented glory of the old world flowers—survivors from an elder day.

"Do you wish it to remain unchanged?" asks Mr. Smith, with surprised *empressement*. "I had no idea—of course, if you express the slightest desire—but" (in a rather mortified tone) "I had imagined that the improvements had met with your approbation. You—you—gave me that impression."

"Do not you think," she answers, turning towards him with a smile, gentle and civil, if steeped in melancholy, "that this one shabby corner will make a good foil for the rest of your new magnificence? But, after all" (slightly shaking her head), "it is your taste that is to be consulted—not mine! After to-day" (shivering a little), "I shall probably never see the place again."

She has sat down on a broken old stone bench, between whose rifts and clefts little stray seedling flowers and baby trees are mer-

rily growing. Her hands fall idly on her lap; and upwafted on the wings of the cabbage-rose scents, her spirit sails away into the past, of which this old garden plot is verily and indeed a piece. She is brought back to the present by the voice of Mr. Smith. She looks round.

Anthony and the children have disappeared. A momentary bitterness nips her heart. Is this his idea of effacing himself judiciously at the right moment? Has he, too, become a party to this dismal jest? She glances apprehensively at her companion. He has seated himself on the bench beside her—his own bench, after all. His little freckled face is for the moment as white as his eyelashes; and there is a purpose—hesitant indeed, and uncertain, but still that frightens her, in his usually purposeless eyes.

"It seems a pity," he is saying tremulously, snatching a thief-like glance at her every now and then, to see how she is taking his re-

marks—"you—you—were always so much attached to the Castle, I understand! It —it—it—seems a pity that you—you—should not resume your residence here." As he comes to this last clause he turns his back completely upon her, and so sits in an agony of nervousness, gnawing the top of his stick.

"And turn you out?" she answers, with a fine cold smile, and a little rallying air that would have baffled a bolder wooer than this; "that would be too ungrateful, after your having so hospitably entertained me; would not it?"

There is a hot uncomfortable silence.

Joan's eyes are roving uneasily round, trying to discover to what point of the compass Anthony and his tormentors have disappeared —waiting only to be sure, in order to make a desperate rush in that direction. Before, however, she has ascertained this, her companion speaks again.

"It—it—is very large," he says in a low and quivering voice, still turning to her only the back of his head; "if you remember, I have always said that it was too large for one person!—perhaps it—it—it—might not be too large for *two*!"

"Do you think not?" she says hastily and rising. "Ah!" (with a sigh of relief), "there is Colonel Wolferstan! he is so good-natured, but we must not allow the children quite to monopolize him, must we?"

So saying, she begins to walk hurriedly along the garden path, in the direction where she sees Colonel Wolferstan at length emerging from among some distant bushes of late red currants, which the children, with the unerring instinct of their kind for food—unerring, even after such a luncheon as Faustine's—have sniffed out. It is the first time since their coming together again under one roof that she has ever gone willingly to meet him. By the time she reaches him vexation

has steeped her face in as lovely a dye as if all the carnations in the garden had given each other rendezvous in her cheeks. She lifts her eyes, full of annoyance and reproach, to his.

"Where have you been?" she cries irritably. "Why did you go away?—it is not fair to break up a party!"

Anthony is silent; but the look that answers hers makes her at once turn away her upbraiding glance, as she feels with a miserable uneasy excitement that after all it is only out of the frying-pan into the fire; out of a very small frying-pan into a very large fire; and that there is no rest for her anywhere. She begins to talk again, quickly and a little at random.

"Why should not we go back through the wilderness?" she asks; "there used to be a wilderness beyond this garden; it is there still; I see the tree-tops waving. We used to get to it through that door" (pointing to a

small arched one in the wall). "Ah!" (going up to it), "it is locked."

"If you like—if you wish," says Mr. Smith in a crestfallen voice, having in the meanwhile come up with them, "I will go and enquire for the key; no doubt some of the gardeners have one."

No one tries to dissuade him, and he sets off at once on this self-imposed errand. No sooner is he out of sight than, "Why, here is the key!" cries Faustine, who has been occupying herself in applying an enquiring eye to the key-hole; in pulling out loose bricks, dislodging old-established wood-lice, and tweaking little cranes'-bills by their long noses; and now, in her pryings, has suddenly discovered the missing article, snugly lying crusted with iron mould, in a convenient cranny.

"I will run and call Mr. Smith back," says Rupert officiously, beginning to suit the action to the word.

"You will do nothing of the kind!" cries Wolferstan sharply, making a detaining clutch at the child's shoulders; then, becoming aware by Rupert's face of the angry peremptoriness of his own tone, he adds in a gentler key, "I mean, my boy, that it is not worth while; he will soon find out his mistake and overtake us."

So saying, he fits the rusty key into the lock; it turns unwillingly, with a grinding sound; the disused hinges give way sulkily, and they all step out together into the green tangle beyond. Once there has evidently been a path through it—a path where two might walk abreast; but nature, who, leave her to herself but a very little while, quietly takes back man's thefts, repairs the rents he has made in her cloak, has been taking back —mending here too. As they pass along, the grasses coolly trammel their feet. The brambles hold out to them the tart plenty of their crude berries; and the disflowered briar

rose catches at them with long fingers, crying "Stay!" Around them the honeysuckle ambitiously climbs the trees, blowing its late trumpets, safe and high aloft; and the briony ties hazel to haw in loving green bonds. Above them the trees have laid together the friendly variety of their leaves; the sycamore its broad platter, and the horse-chestnut its fan, in league to keep out the sun. But at present there is no sun to keep out. Surely he was here—but now! How long is it since the clouds, sweeping up from their unseen chambers, have clean abolished his smile?

On the woodland path there is now no play of gamesome lights; no frolic of little shadows. Instead, everywhere, one same verdurous gloom. A tempered light, as when day dies; a silence as of poppied sleep. Of all God's strong winds there is not one awake. No lightest gust either sighs or laughs, either rings the blue-bell's silent chime, or puffs away the little hawkweed

clocks. The birds too are dumb. By August, their talk is mostly out-talked; their madrigals out-sung; but to-day, not even a garrulous finch twitters, or sparrow cheeps. A hot and drowsy stillness weighs, lead-heavy upon all. Hardly less still than the winds—hardly less silent than the song-birds—the young man and the young woman step along together side by side.

Joan has taken off her hat, and loosened her little kerchief from about her milk-white throat. Whether it be from the thunderous weight of the air or the oppression of the long day's ignoble suffering, she feels as if an iron band were tightly clasped around her brow. All day her spirit has been stretched upon the rack; broken on the wheel. All day she has been, with stiff tight smiles and combated tears, helping at the desecration of her own altars. All day long she has been clapping hands and applauding at her own execution. Now, at least she may be silent.

She need no longer commend the ingenuity of the thumbscrew that dislocates her fingers, or of the boot that crushes her foot: now she may rest. This rest indeed—fevered, hard-pulsed, thundering-hearted—is as much like real rest as the repose that narcotics give a sickly man is like the royal slumber that God gives a healthy child. But after all, an opiate sleep is better than none. Why should they talk? They, to whom all speech worthy of the name is forbidden. If, indeed, their intercourse were likely to be prolonged and stretch over any considerable space of future time, it would be fit to practise themselves in the necessary falsity of civil light talk and empty phrase. But is it not the last day—the last day of all?—is not this the very last walk during which they are ever likely to pace together the green-kirtled summer land? they who once thought that they should walk—tender hand in tender hand—to the distant undreaded grave. It is through

no fault of their own that they are now in each other's company.

Joan's conscience is at ease on that score. It is fate and chance that have thus brought them helpless and unconsenting into transient contact. Nor is there anything of *gênant* or embarrassing in this *tête-à-tête*, which is broken every two or three minutes by one or other of the children, returning from snatchy excursions into the brake; Faustine to exhibit a bramble scratch; Rupert to brag of the pheasants he has started; both to ask loudly for arbitration on some wrangled point. Joan does not know how long they have thus together dumbly trod the wood's lush intricacies—how long this quiet trance—not itself exactly of pain, but with pain for background, pain for foreground, pain for horizon—has lasted, when it is broken in upon by a sudden kingly noise, not made or makable by man, or any of his engines; the sound of a loud and angry thunder-clap. It has been growl-

ing and sulkily muttering in the distance all afternoon, but nobody has heeded it. The children come running back in scared haste, pushing through cornel and briar.

"Oh, Miss Dering," cries Faustine, her small bold face already paled with fear; "did you hear the thunder? I am so frightened! —let us go home!"

"Mitchell says that there was a man struck by lightning the other day," says Rupert encouragingly; "he was as black as a coal all down one side!"

"We had better get out of this as quickly as we can," says Anthony, rousing himself, and looking round at the close-growing tree trunks—the interlaced branches—the thick leaf roof; "we could not well be in a worse place!"

"We must be nearly through the wood," says Joan, waking up again to present realities; "five minutes will bring us into one of the park drives."

They all begin to walk quickly in the direction indicated; the children, indeed, take to their heels and run. No one speaks; nor is there in all the wood one lightest sound. It seems as if every bird and beast and insect were listening with held breath for the sky's next loud speech. Joan's memory has misled her as to distance. It is twenty minutes instead of five, before they emerge into the open. Just as they do so, there comes a mighty rolling crash overhead, as if God were driving His chariot along the clouds, and before you can count one a lovely sudden arrow of deathful light has leapt into their eyes.

It is come and gone, and they are in the dark again. For by this time it has grown very dark—darker than at the middest of many a clear-faced summer night. The clouds — but now piled on the horizon — quiet, sun-kissed Alps—have rushed into one pitchy mass—a canopy of ink; out of which,

momently, the lightning springs in blinding glory. Faustine has covered her face with both hands, and so stumbles on; Rupert, with his brag and his high courage extinct, is beginning to blubber, and to clutch at the out-held hands of Joan and Anthony, as they hastily drag him along.

"Thank God we are out of the wood!" says Joan cheerfully; "hold up, Rupert!—we shall soon be home now!"

But though she speaks confidently, her heart sinks a little as she sees how much farther off than she had imagined rise the sheltering towers of Dering, a good half-mile away at the least. They have reached the park drive, and are posting breathlessly along it, through the alternate dread noise and dreader silence, when, in one of these latter intervals of ominous quiet, they become aware of the sound of rolling wheels and trotting hoofs coming up behind them. They turn to see an empty coal-cart advancing at its heavy

horse's best speed on their tracks. As it draws near, Anthony steps into the middle of the road and hails it.

"Are you going to the Castle?—because if so, will you give these children a lift?"

No sooner said than done. On ordinary occasions Faustine would have looked upon it as very much below the dignity of Miss Smith Deloraine to be wedged between two grimy men on the tilt of a coal-cart, behind a shaggy-heeled cart-horse; but fear has taken all the glory out of her, as it has taken all the brag out of her brother. She would be thankful for even the apothecary and dung-cart prophesied her.

"That was a good move," says Joan, with a sigh of relief and ended responsibility; "they will be in before the rain comes!"

As she speaks—in the twinkle of an eye—the whole world is lit up by one sudden green glare, intolerably lovely, against which the Castle's four towers are cut out clean and fine

as cameos; and, at the same instant, a giant raindrop splashes on the girl's cheek. Its successors are not slow in following it. Down they come, straight and numberless, with such a spiteful force and fierceness as if they were being shot from skyey guns; and mixed with them bullets of hail that bruise and bite.

They have taken to the grass again, so as to make a short cut to the house. Joan has given her sole protection against the weather —her flimsy sunshade — to Faustine. The mighty rain patters and smites on an absolutely undefended head.

"This is bad for you," says Anthony, as with stooped head and blinking eyes he butts against the storm; the hail-stones pelting his eyelids, and driving into his mouth the moment that he opens it.

"Do you think so?" she says cheerily, though blinking too, and gasping a little; "I do not mind it!—it is—it is much better

than the improvements!" (with a breathless laugh).

They are nearing a knoll clad with low scrub, and out of which, here and there, a morsel of bare rock shows itself disconnected and unexplained among the general green flat of grass and bracken.

"There used to be a sort of cave here," says Joan indistinctly, with her mouth full of hail-stones, and her eyes screwed up to peer across the opaqueness of the tempest; "had not we better shelter there a while?"

As she speaks, she redoubles her speed; and outrunning him, is lost for a moment from sight round a small projecting boulder that has advanced its gray foot among the fern.

In a moment he has overtaken her. Close above their heads there is a dread hurly-burly as of thousands of great rocks being angrily trundled down a giant hill-side. An opportune splendour of flame shows them the

friendly mouth of a natural hole in the mimic hill-side; and pushing aside the wet and streaming creepers that overdrape it, they enter, and find themselves at peace.

CHAPTER X.

HALF an hour has passed, and the storm is beginning to wear itself out. The majestic clamour in the heavens that made all meaner noises null, is becoming less incessant. The two young people less continuously see each other's faces perilously glorified by that superb dread shining; but the rain, on the other hand, has redoubled its vigour. The huge drops have merged into one colossal wet sheet, which fills the air and makes the earth one rushing river. Hitherto neither of them has spoken.

It would, indeed, have been useless, as neither could have heard his own or the other's voice in the midst of the ear-rending warfare overhead.

Anthony has stood at the mouth of the cave watching the weather, and Joan has sat down on a bit of rock, which, having fallen at some remote period from the roof, now makes a comfortable seat. Their refuge is but a shallow natural excavation, sloping backwards. Only the front part is high enough to allow of a tall man standing upright in it, but it is daintily floored with fine sand; and in the chinks of its rough walls—stained here and there by a trickle of water—delicate asplениums flourish, and tufts of stout hartstongue hang. Anthony has just put his head out between the drenched fluff-balls and streaming tendrils of the traveller's joy, that makes a curtain before their retreat, and taken a look at the sky. Then he draws it back again, and advances towards his fellow-sufferer.

"It will be over in ten minutes," he says confidently.

"And we are neither of us black all down one side," answers Joan, lifting her small flower face with a smile to his. She has raised both hands to her head, in the endeavour to restore it to its usual robin-like sleekness, but as most of its hair-pins have disappeared, and it is unmanageably wet, this is a task beyond the power of even her deft fingers. The band of iron seems loosened now from about her brows. The spirits of the storm seem to have set hers free. It is no longer bowed and grovelling on the earth.

He stands for a few moments in silence, discomfortably following the quick movements of her slim hands with his envious gray eyes. Then—

"Now tell me," he says feverishly; "I have been waiting till we could hear the sound of our own voices. All through the wood I

was trying to bring myself to ask you, but I could not—I can now. Have you any piece of news for me?—anything to tell me?—quick!"

Her arms are still lifted, her fingers still straying among the soft strands of her bright hair.

"Any piece of news?" she repeats, in a puzzled voice.

"I obeyed orders," he goes on, with a dry laugh; "you cannot say that I stood in your light. I *effaced myself judiciously*, did not I?" (with a bitter mimicking of his wife's tone).

She understands now. She lets her arms fall with a petulant gesture into her lap. A flush as faint as the earliest dawn-birth paints the complete pallor of her cheeks.

"Was the bribe big enough?" he goes on harshly. "I know that it is the biggest that could be offered to you."

Her little white chin sinks forward on the wet breast of her calico gown, whose poor

fabric the great rain-drops have saturated. She shakes her head with a movement of negation and distaste.

"It is no bribe now."

"Then it is not to be?" (his breathless words treading pantingly on the heels of her answer).

She straightens her slender body, and draws up her proud young throat, while the pale dawn blush deepens into the angry ruddiness of a winter after-glow.

"I must indeed have come down in the world," she says in a compressed low voice, "before it could have seemed probable to any one."

He draws a deep long breath as one reprieved.

"And besides," she adds after a moment's thought, in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible, "there is the same bar that there always was against my marrying any one."

"Which is none at all," he breaks in con-

temptuously. "Does that rotten cord still hold? I know that it held gallantly once" (with a sneer), "but is it possible that it holds still? Well, some fine day it will snap. It is out of nature that it should not; and whoever fights against nature must, sooner or later, go to the wall; sooner or later" (with a strained smile) "you will go to the wall! It may not be to-day, or to-morrow, or the day after that, but on some to-morrow" (still keeping that hard tense smile) "I shall certainly hear—my ears are always listening for it—Joan Dering is married!"

"And you will say, 'I am glad,'" she says, trembling a little, but raising her patient blue eyes to the passionate trouble of his; his that used, in the old time, to brim over with such sheer jollity and life delight, "'being her true honest friend I am glad.'"

"It would be the best thing that could happen to you!" he says grudgingly; leaning one vigorous shoulder against the low

rock wall, while his covetous regard still holds and thrills her; and the rain sings and swishes down outside, and the creeper-curtain shuts them close from the outer world—them two alone together; "brave as you are—none braver, I know that—high as you hold your head—you are but a weakly thing to be let go at large in this big blustering world, with no one to give or take buffets for you!"

"Am I so weakly?" she says, with the same flickering smile hovering about her tender mouth, but yet with a little air of spirit and resolve; "so you told me three years and a half ago—there" (nodding slightly in the direction of the Castle); "but you see that I am still alive! I still hold my head above water; my feet have a firmer grip of this earth than you think for."

"Three years and a half!" he repeats, with an accent of slow reflection. "Ah! but (looking at her piercingly) "what sort of a three years and a half have they been?"

For a moment she winces as one suddenly stabbed; but instantly recovers herself.

"I have suffered!" she says steadily; "but I have enjoyed too. The sufferings were like sharp rocks here and there; the pleasures like fine sand strewn all over my life. One is very ungrateful," she says humbly; "one remembers the large pains, but one does not remember all the flowers one has smelt—all the jokes one has laughed at—all the deep sleeps and pleasant dreams one has had."

"You are philosophic," he says harshly; "but suppose that the next three years are like them, and the next three again after that? how then?"

She shudders perceptibly, and for a moment covers her face with her hands; then—

"That is impossible!" she says steadily. "Did you ever hear of any one having their head cut off *twice?*"

There is a silence. The rain's rush has waxed fainter; the storm is bearing its royal

clamour and its beautiful death arrows otherwhere.

Anthony has again restlessly walked to the cave's mouth. He has stretched out his handsome head, so that the rain-drops may fall upon it and assuage its hot ache. They are glistening crystal bright on his brown locks, as he turns and again approaches her. It is such a confined space that two steps bring him quite close to her—so close that if he did but stretch out his arms ever so little, they would encompass her lithe body and its limp cotton sheath. His face is white and his lips are twitching.

"All the possibilities of life are ahead of you, as they are behind me," he says in a bitter low voice. "Take my advice—do not throw them away next time—do not cut a second man's throat for his own good; for my part, I doubt its always answering. When next some poor fellow tries to light a fire, by which he may warm himself all his days, in

the depth of those angel-sweet, ice-cold eyes of yours—in God's name let him!"

She has risen to her feet, trembling more than any wind-shaken leaf on an autumn tree-top. Passion-pale they stand facing each other.

"I have been on the rack all day," she says in a voice of concentrated suffering and reproach; "are you determined not to let me get off it? are you resolved that this day shall be marked by *every* kind of pain? What do you mean by twitting me with my cold eyes—my quietly beating heart? It is not the first time! What do you mean, I say, by it? If you had any mercy—if you had any common humanity—you would be glad—most glad for my sake that they *are* cold! What better gift than coldness," she cries, lifting passionate hands and anguished eyes to the low rock roof above her, "has God now left in all His treasury to give me?"

So saying, she slips hastily past him, and though the rain is still falling sharply from the departing clouds, passes resolutely out through the streaming traveller's joy into the drenched grass beyond. What can he do but follow her? In swiftest silence they walk along. The sycamores empty their broad platters on their heads, as they pass beneath; and the bracken wets them almost waist high. To traverse the soaked grass is like wading a river.

Before they have gone ten paces, Joan's thin summer boots are so full of water that, they rattle as she goes; and on her whole shivering body there is not one dry stitch. But what does it matter? What does any present discomfort or future rheumatism matter, in comparison of that suffocating *tête-à-tête?*

It will soon be ended now. In ten minutes she will be safely housed in the midst of her securely tiresome daily *entourage,* hedged from

all perilous encounters by Faustine's exacting calls for attention, and Rupert's monopolising arms. But will she? They have reached the Castle, only to find that their fellow-travellers have set off home without them.

"And left us behind?" gasps Joan in a voice of disbelief and consternation; "impossible!"

"If you please 'm," says the butler, with explanatory sweetness (he knows all about Joan and has the contempt for commerce, and the feeling for *ci-devants* so common among good-class servants)—"if you please 'm, the ladies thought it best to take advantage of the first break in the storm; the buggy is still here, and Mr. Smith Deloraine left word that he hoped Colonel Wolferstan would be so good as to drive Miss Dering home in it!"

Joan sinks down on a chair, regardless of the injury that her wet contact is inflicting on Mr. Smith Deloraine's *capitonné* blue

satin; sinks down with a feeling of defeat and checkmatedness. Of what use is it to fight—to draw one's wooden sword and set one's lathen spear in rest, when man and beast, woman and child, storm and tempest conspire to combat against one?

They are off now. Joan has been partially and capriciously dried at the kitchen fire. Her shoulder blades, indeed, still feel sticky, and there is a general sense of adhesiveness about her whole costume; but her boots no longer rattle, nor do cold and trickly rills race down the nape of her neck. Away they go, with the speed naturally resulting from a feather-light carriage and a free fresh horse homeward turned. The very nature of the vehicle is against her; necessitating, as it does, close proximity; and excluding even the poor chaperonage of a groom's presence. Away they go, arrow-swift, through the dusking country; for the evening draws on apace. The sky's ill-humour is ended. The

clouds that, a while ago, shocked together with such a fury, have now drawn peaceably apart again. Along the horizon they quietly lie in lofty ranges, vaporous Andes, that in this uncertain light look nigh as solid as real mountains. The dust is asleep; a great glistering rain-drop hangs on each sharp hedge-row thorn. There is a pleasant sound of falling and pattering among the full-leaved trees.

The slight noise of the large light wheels, the quick plash of the iron hoofs through the new-made puddles, are the only sounds that break the complete evening silence. Very little speech passes between the young man and the young woman. They used to be so garrulous when they were together, chattering lengthily like happy children. Once he has formally asked her if she were cold; and once she has restlessly enquired how much farther they have to go? A feverish longing haste to be at the end—to have it over—mixed with a bitter contra-

dictory pang of regret as each fresh milestone flies past, is making Joan's blood painfully burn and prick along her veins, and her sad heart heavily throb.

As for Anthony, he is away—back in the past. How often in the old time, during her visit to the Abbey, did they two thus drive together, unchaperoned, servantless, in sweet and sociable solitude through the darkling summer land! She was full as near to him then as she is now. There was then no reason in heaven or hell why he should not load her with the all-tender names which now, forbidden, sinful, harshly commanded back, crowd to his parched lips.

There were then no unseen arms of fate and iron law interposing between them, and waving them aloof. Then neither God nor man forbade that he should gather this sweetest lily and wear it, year out, year in, upon his heart. And yet, then he had with cold and cautious content addressed her as

"Miss Dering," had flooded her patient ear with facile banal talk and egotistic anecdotes about himself. It seems incredible! The storm, as I have said, is gone; but one can plainly tell that elsewhere it is still pouring out the vials of its wrath and dealing its bolts. None of its thunder is indeed now ever so faintly heard; but now and again all the eastern heavens are lit up by one broad reflected glory—one tranquil yellow lustre of sheet lightning, as if for a noble moment the gates of God's palace had been rolled back and the inner splendour allowed to come pouring through.

"We look as if we were driving straight into heaven!" says Joan in a voice of tremulous admiration, fixing her wistful eyes on the lovely phantasmagoria, that even as she looks vanishes and is swallowed up.

"Do we?" he answers. "Nay" (with an accent of profound melancholy), "I think that some time ago we missed the way there."

These are the last words that they speak. The drive has come to its conclusion: the good horse stands still; the miry wheels no longer lightly turn. The hall lamps flash out upon them; the servants come to the door. Silently Wolferstan has lifted her down, and without a word she turns and begins to drag her stiff limbs through the vestibule, up the staircase, along the corridor.

Surely the fight is ended now—now that this last hard day touches its end? Surely to-morrow's sun will rise upon a safe blank, as free from danger as from possible joy? She has reached the schoolroom, and crossed its threshold before she perceives that he has followed her. Two lit candles stand on the table, but there are no other signs of occupancy. It is empty.

"I have come to say good-bye," he says in a matter-of-fact voice.

"You go early?" she says hastily and with an artificial smile.

"At 8.30."

"Then of course it *is* good-bye" (holding out her hand).

He takes it, but the expression of his face is scarcely one of farewell.

"It is good-bye," he repeats, "but it is not the long vague good-bye you think; it is only good-bye for a week. Do you know" (his whole face breaking up into a happy laughter) "that the man to whom I was going for the first has thrown me over, and Smith Deloraine has asked me to come here instead!"

"And you are coming?" (breathlessly).

He nods, "Yes."

She makes no sort of rejoinder. Again that feeling of overpowering panic, of irretrievable defeat has mastered her.

Have not gods and men joined hands in one bond against her? The battle is not over after all; perhaps it has scarce begun. Bad as to-day has been, it has been only the

Quatre Bras of which the Waterloo is yet to follow.

"So it is scarcely more than good-night," he says softly; his fond and covetous eyes taking in all the pitiful details of her appearance—small fagged face, the dark tired stains under the heavy eyes, the pathetically drooped red mouth, the forlorn gown clinging to the pretty willowy figure.

"A week passes by like a flash, doesn't it? but yet it is good-bye too. Joan!" (her disused name coming strangely to her ears in a whisper, as the young man turns from white to red and from red to white)—"Joan! whose fault is it that we need ever have said good-bye at all?"

Perhaps he is resolved that to that tough question she shall give no answer; for at the next clock-tick her stammering lips are close shut by his kisses, and her heart is beating out its agony on his. For one moment she lies quiet—bewildered soul and worn-out body

in that forbidden shelter; then with a rush of recollected anguish she wrests herself away from him; and looking at him for a moment fixedly, yet with a wildness as of one whose wits are wandering, she staggers away.

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The day's pleasuring is ended. Faustine's profuse tears for her ruined flounces—only partially dried by the assurance that the washtub and the mangle will restore them to their original stiff elegance—have had their current stemmed by slumber. Montacute, physicked into convalescence, has fallen asleep despite all his nurse's remonstrances, with Leviticus for pillow; his last waking word being a 'posing question, which has brought the blush to his attendant's cheek, as to one of the more subtle niceties of the Mosaic law.

Most even of the grown-up members of the expedition have gone to bed early, fagged and cross. Joan's duties are ended. Till eight o'clock to-morrow morning her time is her own. She is in her bedroom, standing before her glass, staring steadfastly, as if it were a new sight, at the face which that glass gives back; at the privet-white cheeks, at the horrified blue eyes looking out at her in frosty dismay, at the pinched set mouth.

"Whither am I going?" she says out loud, stonily watching her reflected lips as they stiffly move; "Whither am I dragging him?" Then clasping her lifted hands above her head, she stumbles forward, and with an utter collapse of all restraint and self-government sinks upon the floor, and so, through the watches of the night, lies all along in deepest abasement before God. Is not a bed too soft for such as she? Are not the hard boards a fitter place for her to pour out her tears and penitential groans? The still hours

walk over her with their soundless feet. Through the wide window there steals now and then a little wakeful gust, that, sighing softly awhile about the dusky room, sinks like all else to sleep again.

"Oh, love!" she says aloud, burying her burning face on her out-flung arms, while great tearless sobs make all her prostrate body shake and quiver—"Oh, poor unstable love! with all my high talk and large professions, what have I ever been but a curse and a cruelty to you! Was not it enough for me to have blundered away your happiness? must I tempt you to taint your honour too?"

Her voice dies away in utter brokenness, and for a while there is silence. Then, by and by, she speaks again.

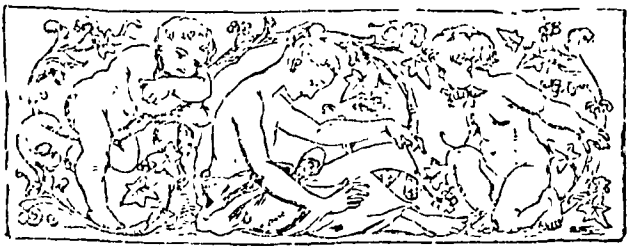
"There is only one poor kindness now left me to do for you!" she says more collectedly; "to take myself at once wholly and for ever out of your life; it is the last meagre gift I

shall ever give you; let me at least give it promptly."

Then she is once more dumb; only now and again a catching of the breath, a dry hard sob, tell that to her through all the sleepy hours sleep's solace never comes. Once before has she thus kept a vigil in love's name; on that austerest winter night at Helmsley when she had first heard of her fickle love's early faithlessness. Even so then had she fought and wrestled all night; pushing with useless tender hands against fate's iron doors, and with the cold dawn victory came. Thus it is now. She has raised herself from her attitude of despair and abasement. She is leaning against the casement, no longer sobbing or moaning; tranquilly watching the coming of the young new morn. There is as yet no earliest sun-peep, and, nevertheless, all over the face of nature there is a look of expectant surety. When he is climbing in red glory over the

elm-tops it will be not more certain that he is coming than now when no faintest tinge of his smile paints the high orient gates. Never since the world swung round has he failed to come. He will come to-day. As she so thinks, a feeling of solemn awful comfort steals over her heart, at the sense of the utter certainty of the Hand—whosever it may be, wrangle as we may over that—that guides the world; the Hand that never makes an uncertain stroke or a blurred outline.

"It will be right!" she says, looking towards the east; her lovely sunk eyes serene with faith and reverence. "By and by it will be right!"



CHAPTER XI.

IT is now five days since the Dering pleasure party. Even as a theme of school-room talk it is worn prematurely threadbare. In the natural course of things it might have outlasted a week, but as it is, a new topic has elbowed it away. Of the fifth day there is now but little to run. In half an hour the sun will be gone. His fire-horses are stretching in their last gallop. These are almost the latest arrows in his quiver, that he is shooting into the Smith Deloraine school-room. They are

lighting up an overset ink bottle, topsy-turvy chairs, dislocated grammars and disembowelled histories, diverted from their natural uses to hurtle as missiles through the air: a young Mænad, with rent gathers and tempestuous mane, flying in stormy gallop, armed with a fire shovel, over the prostrate furniture, in hot pursuit of two fugitive boys, both bellowing—the one with the joy of battle, the other with the fear. For the reign of Chaos and old Night has come again, and the young Smith Deloraines have a month's holiday.

This is the way in which they are inaugurating it. It is sudden and unlooked-for good fortune which mostly turns people's heads. Perhaps it is the unexpectedness of their boon of liberty which makes them so frightfully misuse it. A week ago no such emancipation was even talked of. But to the surprise of every one, Miss Dering, whose summer holidays have been delayed thus late to suit her employer's convenience, and

who, indeed, has hitherto shown a great indifference as to whether she has any summer holidays at all, has, on the day after the Dering party, asked for—with a quiet insistence which makes refusal difficult, and consequently obtained—a month's leave of absence. To be off—to be well away before the day of Anthony's announced return—this appears to her the one necessity which for her life still holds.

It seems as if stern-eyed angels had come to her as they came to Syrian Lot as he sat at eventide at his city gate in the old time, bidding her arise and flee for her life. And she, docilely listening to that inner voice, has arisen and fled. To-day she has been travelling all day long; her head is full of noise and her eyes of grit. But the railway part of her journey is now ended. In a hired fly she is tardily jogging through the suburbs of Helmsley. The horse goes but slowly after his kind; "not nearly so fast as the butcher's

did," she says to herself with a grim smile of recollection; so she has plenty of leisure to note the changes that two years and a half have wrought.

The scaffolding poles are fewer and the stuccoed houses more. The brickfields have shrunk and the deodaras grown. The town is stretching out thriving arms which will soon take Portland Villa into their embrace. Even the Hospital has thrown out an ugly wing from its bald square bulk. The four little brother villas are in sight now—even on them change has passed. Sardanapalus has painted its shutters green; Campidoglio has added a story to its height. Only Portland Villa remains wholly unaltered, save for the necessary action of time and decay. There are a few more tiles missing from the roof, a few more patches of plaster from the walls; but that is all. The gate is still off its hinges, and still tied up with string. She looks out with interest as the driver pulls and fumbles

at it. To all appearance it is the identical fragment of rotten cord which secured it when last she rolled through.

They have turned in now; down the little woody drive comes the old pattering avalanche of dogs' feet—the same hallelujah chorus of loud pug voices. So to the sound of music Joan's vehicle draws up at the portal.

"If you please 'm," says the driver, returning from a useless quest to the fly door, "I'm afraid I cannot ring, the bell is broke."

Still broken after two years and a half! On this particular occasion it is not of much consequence, as the door is now quickly opened and the aperture is filled with eager welcoming faces—all one broad smile, with welcoming voices, outdoing each other and almost the dogs in loud salutations. The next moment Joan is in her aunt's copious embrace. As one after another three pairs of substantial arms warmly enfold her, a feel-

ing of remorse nips the girl's spirit, that after all she has perhaps not set enough store by her place in these homely hearts. Long ago, indeed, she has repaid them, and with ample usury, her pecuniary obligations, but love is paid only by itself. In this debt has not she been but a laggard debtor?

They have passed into the drawing-room now; one of Joan's hands, firmly held by Mrs. Moberley, the other by Di. Formerly she would have shrunk from having her fingers thus imprisoned; but time and its austere experience of the outer world's unlovingness have made her thankfully take affection's clasp, even though it may be a rather sultry one.

"This is but a poor home-coming for you, Joan," says Mrs. Moberley, sinking down into the roomy shabbiness of her own chimney-corner chair, and in so doing slightly protruding a boot burst in exactly the same place as of old. (Can it possibly, in defiance of all

the probabilities of time and leather, be the same boot!) "But you gave us no notice, child; if you had sent us but the least pen-scratch a week ago we would have had a few of them down from the Barracks to make a little fun; they are not" (shaking her head) "as good a lot as our old ones—more inclined to be high and not so ready to take one as they find one, but still" (with a smile of philosophic satisfaction), "after all, the army is the army when all is said and done."

"We did stare when we got your letter," cries Bell, widely opening her large round eyes, her whole complacent fat face, intricately towering hair and lengthily floating curl, pleasantly agitated by curiosity. "I think" (looking down with an inexplicable air of consciousness) "that if we had not had a good many things to think of just lately, we should never have left off guessing and wondering about it."

"No disagreeableness I hope, Joan?" says

Mrs. Moberley, with a not unkindly inquisitiveness in her jovial eye. "You have not had any tiff with your mistress, I hope?"

Mrs. Moberley can never be persuaded that there is any difference between the phraseology of servitude and that of tuition. Joan shakes her head.

"Oh no, nothing."

"What does it matter what has brought her?" cries Diana brusquely, coming as of yore to the rescue, since she sees a look of disquiet and embarrassment on her cousin's face; "that is her business. She is here now —that is ours."

"Of course," answers Bell, still with a continuance of that mystic consciousness, and holding her head extremely on one side; "only that coming just now it happens so pat that one is almost inclined to think that there is something not quite canny about it."

"To be sure!" cries Mrs. Moberley heartily,

brought back by this suggestion to the remembrance of their own glories and interests, which her niece's arrival has momentarily thrust into the background of her mind. "Well, Joan, whatever you may have to tell us, we have a piece of news to tell you—we are going to have a wedding in the family" (her whole face breaking up into triumphant smiles, and putting on her spectacles the better to watch the effect of her communication on her niece's countenance). "What do you think of that?"

"Indeed!" cries Joan in an accent of unaffected interest and excitement, her look involuntarily turning at once towards the rustic charms of Diana, with an inward wonder as to whether the tardy Micky has at length come to the front; her feelings divided between physical repulsion from the idea of him as a first cousin, and joy at the thought of poor Diana's long fidelity meeting with its reward.

But Diana shakes her curly head.

"You need not look at me! it is not I; I am still to be had!" she says dryly.

"Bell then!"

But Bell is in no case to reply. Virgin shame has too completely mastered her. It is only from the ineffable bliss and hurt-modesty of her large drooped face that Joan can gather her answer.

"The first break in a family is a sad thing," says Mrs. Moberley, trying to subdue her jubilant features into a decent semblance of pensive regret; "but in other respects I am sure I have not a word to say! One of our old lot and of her poor papa's profession and altogether — I have always said" (with a relieved lapse into mirth, as sudden as the leap back into uprightness of an unstrung bow) "that it would be very handy to have a medical man in the family!"

"He is the doctor in the 170th," says Diana, with laconic explanation; "don't you

remember him? we never would dance with him."

"The regiment is at Cork now," continues Mrs. Moberley, her complacent flow of narrative undisturbed by her second daughter's uncomplimentary observation; "the bride and bridegroom are to join at once after the wedding; there she will be amongst all the old set, and quite one of themselves too now. I declare I can't help envying her! as I said to him the other day" (beginning again to laugh), "I have half a mind to marry him myself."

"It is quite an old attachment," says Bell, having by this time recovered the power of utterance, though she still speaks in a small coy voice, as if she were saying something indecent. "It is more than two years since he began to be particular. I remember so well that the first time I noticed anything out of the way was the day that you and Mrs. Wolferstan passed us in the barouche;

we had just been changing hats for a bit of fun, and you came round the corner so suddenly upon us, that we had scarcely time to change back. I thought I should have expired! I remember his saying what a pretty girl you were, and that he hoped you would get a good husband."

Three years ago Joan would have shuddered and shrunk like a touched sensitive plant at hearing of such a wish expressed by such lips, but time has made her more lenient.

"It was very good of him," she says, smiling gently and without irony; "I pass on the wish to you now heartily."

"He is not a bit like a doctor when you come to know him," says Mrs. Moberley narratively; "quite a sporting fellow in his way, and almost as fond of his jokes as Micky was. Ah, Micky!" (with a sigh, bracketed between two smiles), "we were all a little disappointed in him, I think. He

was one of those that love and that ride away."

As she speaks she glances meaningly in the direction of Diana, which would sufficiently explain her allusion were there any present to whom it needed explanation. There is a temporary silence.

Joan's eyes have wandered round the little room with a far more eager interest, if with infinitely less surprise and contempt, than they did on the first evening of her coming; its shabby cheap smartness is now as nothing to her. The tragic memories with which almost every article of its commonplace sordid furniture is loaded, have cast out and abolished all the feelings of hurt taste and æsthetic disgust with which they had formerly filled her. There is the very door, with its paint almost entirely scratched off for a good foot above the ground by the dogs in their requests for exit and entry, against which she had set her back to forbid Mrs.

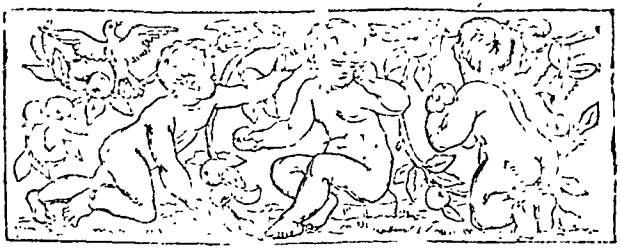
Wolferstan's escape, while she wrung from her that bitter secret which has since made dark all her fair white life and his too. There is the faded once gaudy tablecloth on which he had desperately flung down his brown head when he came to her on that snowy midnight in his madness. There—to go back to earlier, lighter memories—is the identical trumpery vase in which she had grudgingly set his coveted flowers. How unchanged it all is! Is it possible that she has been away at all? As she so thinks her eyes fall on the dogs, who are now politely but firmly smelling her all over before readmitting her into the family. Then, indeed, doubt as to the period of her absence from Portland Villa is at an end. Time has plenteously poured his snows on Mr. Brown's serious face, and has turned even his stiff whiskers white; while from Reggy and Algy the trifling, if amiable, levity that so eminently distinguished them has for ever disappeared. It would ill sit

upon dogs of such a portly respectability as theirs. They look as if they were householders, ratepayers, almost churchwardens; while as for Charlie, his place knows him no more. Joan's meditations are presently broken in upon by the voice of Bell, timid and virginal as before.

"He was anxious to come in this evening," she says bashfully, "but I would not hear of it. One must" (simpering) "draw the line somewhere. There is no saying how much he wishes to see you; he says he is sure he shall feel much more like a brother than a cousin to you."

"I am afraid that we shall have to make rather a smart turn-out of it," says Mrs. Moberley, trying to temper with a few grains of factitious regret the exuberant frolicsome jollity of her eyes and tone; "people seem to expect it of us: half a dozen bridesmaids and a groom apiece; there is the beauty of a garrison town—one never need run short

of beaux! They say" (throwing a hopeful and encouraging look upon her niece and younger daughter) "that one marriage makes many. Well, we shall see!"



CHAPTER XII.

"Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God! a second time
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestalled in triumph?"

The Ring and the Book.

JOAN'S return is now a three days' old event. She is no longer treated with guest privileges or guest formality, but has subsided easily and as a matter of course into her niche as one of themselves. Even their curiosity as to the cause of her sudden reappearance amongst them—a curiosity which ought to be all the

keener, seeing that it is never gratified—has died, swallowed up by the more absorbing and personal topics of Bell's trousseau, Bell's cake, Bell's bridesmaids.

Joan has smiled to herself once or twice with ironic sadness at the recollection of her unnecessary fears as to the difficulty she would find in parrying their questions and baffling their kindly inquisitiveness; when, in fact, there is after all no one sufficiently interested in the matter to try to force the lock or even turn the key of her shut confidence.

It is afternoon now. All morning she has been diligently stitching at Bell's going-away gown; which, after the wedding-dress itself, is perhaps the culminating point of interest in the whole *corbeille;* stitching as she formerly stitched at the alpacas, which were destined to fill with awful admiration the men, and with panic-struck envy the women, of the 170th Regiment. She has no

longer, indeed, any Paris patterns to sacrifice; but what she has—her skilled labour, her artistic instinct, her patience, and her taste—she gives readily; more readily, indeed, with a greater simplicity, and less sense of being a martyr, than in the old time.

She is rewarded by Bell's exuberant gratitude, and by her expansive assurance that "she will do as much for her when her hour comes!" (with an affected sigh and a proud smile); by Mrs. Moberley's encouraging asseveration "that she would save any man that married her fifty pounds a year; and that she (Mrs. Moberley) will take care to let them know it;" and by the silent but admiring gratitude of Diana's eyes.

She is free now; free for the whole afternoon; free to go wherever she lists, except into the Portland Villa drawing-room, which on these latter days has, from dinner to tea-time, been consecrated as a temple of Love, into which no profane foot dare intrude. She

has therefore set out on a walk with the dogs. During the last two days she has been making sad pilgrimages to the scenes where her short love drama played itself out; as one that, returning after absence to find dead those whom he left alive, travels pensively from new grave to new grave

Yesterday she stood among the sandhills, looking seawards; trying again to set her feet with melancholy accuracy in exactly that spot of the waste sameness where she had mistakenly, and to his lifelong hurt, renounced him. To-day her steps are carrying her towards the little wood, where, in the lusty spring-time, sung to by loud thrush voices, they had sat side by side on a primrose couch, and innocently talked.

The day is cloudy and there is a good deal of wind; not a summer wind, softly frolicsome, but with a tart touch of autumn in its breath. It is blowing all the leaves inside out, and coldly showing their whitish under-

sides. Joan shivers. She has no inner warmth to make up for the outside chilliness. Her limbs draw themselves languidly one after the other: all the spring seems to have gone out of her young body.

The battle is over indeed, and the victory won, but the victor's joy is not yet hers. The day after the battle is often a greater trial of nerve than the battle itself. The long strain of effort is ended: the painful high excitement is cold and dead. The blood that ran so hotly tingling along her veins creeps sluggish and slow; the heart that pulsed with such an agony of speed and energy beats low and faint. She has fought, and she has conquered; and for this she is numbly aware that she is thankful. But it is rather a knowledge stored in the background of her heart, than a feeling of any activity or life. To-day all the chords of her being are vibrating to another touch.

Her whole tired soul and unstrung body

are crying out in the human creature's bitter yearning for personal happiness; in that heart-hunger which is stayed sometimes by hope, but which, even in furthest old age, is never quite extinguished. To be only twenty-three, and in all the possible, nay probable, long years ahead to have nothing but pale resignation, hard self-sacrifice, long cold endeavour to look forward to. Peer and gaze as she may into the gray dim future before her, she knows that she will see it lit by no glimmer of warm household hearth; by no shining of husband's smile, or children's laughing eyes.

Alone, alone, alone, to the very end, which makes us all equal, seeing that in death we are every one alone. And if her own prospect is so unsmiling, neither can she draw any solace from the consideration of his. Tears, bitterer than any that her own fate has ever called forth from her, steal now into her eyes as she thinks of him; of his

altered look, and perished gladness; of his empty heart and homeless home; worst of all, thinks—for love in her case is not blind—of his pliant malleable nature, so easily moulded by the influences that are nearest to him; thinks, too, of what those influences are.

"If he had been of a higher nature," she says to herself in an agony of almost mother-love; so absolutely clean and free from all taint of passion or selfishness is it—"If he had been of a higher nature, stronger, more self-contained, I could have better let him go, since he could have better done without me!"

She has reached the wood now, and is out of the rough wind's reach. She has sat down at a birch foot, and clasped her hands round her knees while her eyes stray pensively over the woodland pageant round her. It is quite a different show from that which nature set before her on that her first visit, which to-day

brings so vividly back. Then everything was waxing; now everything is waning. There is now no abundant noise of loud music in the air; only once and again a little robin's pipe, wintrily cheerful as if it were his duty, not his pleasure, to sing. Where the primroses opened their young eyes on a strong new world, there are only long limp leaves, sapless and outworn; and where the low violets shook out their perfume, and the ground-ivy spread its little blue carpet, the sorrel and the ragwort, that sadly close the procession of the summer flowers, reign unloved and alone.

Joan's mind is too heavily freighted with its own load to be consciously occupied by a comparison between that day and this; but perhaps, without her knowing it, the changed and sobered scene adds its quota to her weight of sadness. Even the dogs that on that April day galloped and rummaged among the dead leaves and brushwood in such a

frenzy of happy bustle, seem now, in their staid maturity, to condemn the resultless chases of their youth. Mr. Brown's venerable form is already curled in slumber. From his hoary nose, snores of a human loudness and frequency have already begun to ascend. Regy and Algy, who during the last day or two have been nourishing some mysterious grievance in their breasts, are now showing their contempt for one another by walking very slowly close round each other with tails curled to the *ne plus ultra* of tightness; stepping very high and growling.

Joan has closed her eyes, weary with all her late tears. One hand lies nerveless, palm upwards, in her lap; the other rests on Mr. Brown's head. Her cheek is leant against the shining white birch bark; and above her the delicate birch boughs sway and droop. From the land of waking reverie, dark and clouded, Joan is passing into the fairer domain of dream. What stoutest

fighter may not, after the battle is over, lay his head on his knapsack, and sweetly, deeply, sleep. But let him be quite sure that it is over. Oh, Joan! you have laid your buckler and your sword too soon aside!

The hottest of your fight has yet to come. I think that Joan never knows in the after-time how long her light doze lasts — that doze so doubtfully hovering on the debatable land. But suddenly, in one moment, she has sprung into broad wakefulness again, to find herself sitting bolt upright; the dogs at variance but now, united in one vociferous din of angry barking; to find her own heart bounding as if it would leap away from her body; to find, lastly, one standing over her, death-pallid, statue-still—one from whom five days ago she fled for her life.

"Did you think that you had escaped me?" he says slowly, in a hollow low voice, not holding out his hand, or offering her any other greeting.

She has drawn herself to her feet. One weak hand grasps the tree trunk, so late her pillow, for support. Her eyes look steadfastly into the unsteadfast wretchedness of his. In hers there is none of the stunned surprise, the bewildered horror, that had filled them when on that other day he had roughly burst at midnight upon her sad reverie. They are occupied only by an unnamed pain.

"Why have you come?" she says in a voice that is almost compassionate, stern, yet most gentle too.

Under that voice he winces, and a shiver runs over all his body.

"When you look at me like that," he says, shuddering—"when you look at me like that you make me feel as if I were some unclean creeping thing, that must crawl away out of your sight; but yet—but yet" (stammering and breathing heavily, as one oppressed by some great and ponderous weight) "to-day

not even your eyes shall daunt me !—for once I shake off their tyranny !"

He stops suddenly, as if suffocated, and so stands, with dilating nostrils and clenched hands before her.

"Why have you come ?" she repeats in the same tone of inexorable icy gentleness, still holding him with that austere yet pitying gaze.

"I will tell you," he says, collecting himself with a great effort, and speaking almost in a whisper; "it will not take long in the telling. I have come" (dwelling with slow and heavy emphasis on each word) "here, where I once offered you wealth, honour, love, to offer you to-day poverty, dishonour, but love still, love always, love to the end !—one can give but what one has; this is all I now have to give."

He need no longer complain of the domination of her eyes; she has slowly dropped them, and has turned away from him with a low groan.

Until to-day it had seemed to her that she has already, in her short life, often and deeply supped of sorrow; but now she knows that till this moment she has but sparely tasted it. What personal loss, grief, bereavement could be named in the same breath with the immedicable pain of witnessing, helping, nay causing, this debasement of the beloved? She utters not a word; but no torrent of reproach or invective could give him such a sense of aloofness from her, as does that eloquent dumbness.

"Is this all your answer?" he says unsteadily; "this abhorrent gesture—this stony silence? I tell you" (with gathering excitement) "that I cannot bear it!—say, do whatever else you will, but do not dare to set me at this cold, contemptuous distance away from and below you! Do not make me feel as if I were a *murderer!* Joan!—Joan!—Joan!" (with a sudden change of key, spreading out his hands to her with an ex-

ceeding great and bitter cry). "Come to me! —I, that in love's name have a right to command!—I that love you, and whom you love —I command you, come to me!"

There was a time, when to that summons her whole soul would have gone out in glad and ready acquiescence; but now, if it had been addressed to the dumb ears of one already dead, it could not have met with less answer. Only a quivering of the eyelids; only a slight twitching of the pale set lips show that she has heard it.

"You know what my life is," he goes on in a rough low voice, as though afraid that if he paused for one moment, or gave himself any breathing space, his nerve would fail him; killed by the stony misery of that face of hers; "you have seen with your own eyes —close, so that there can be no mistake about it—that ghastly comedy, that caricature, that I am pleased to call my marriage!" (with a most bitter sneer); "you know, as well as I

do, that this is a theft that robs no one!—Joan!" (his voice rising to new heights of woful entreaty), "I tell you, that in all this wide, full world there is not one living soul but you that wants me! Can it be a sin to take what none grudges you?" But still there is neither voice nor movement—only the grave green forest silence. "Speak!" he cries, maddened by her dumbness, laying his hand heavily on her shoulder, as if to wake her out of sleep; "speak! speak!—you can say nothing for which I have not an answer ready. You can use no words to me that I have not already used to myself beforehand. Speak!—there is no extremity of your anger which I am not prepared to bear the brunt of; but in the name of all mercy and sanity, let it be an anger that speaks."

Then, indeed, she obeys him.

"Anger!" she repeats, lifting her eyes with difficulty, as if they were some great

weight, from the grassy earth at her foot, to the smoke-gray sky, faintly seen between the tossing tree-tops overhead; and speaking very slowly, in a tone of heaviest heart-wrung anguish—"Anger! does one hurt as I am feel *anger*?"

At the unmeasured sorrow, yet meekness of her words, a wave of unspeakable shame and remorse rolls over his stormy soul; but it is too late to go back now.

"You know what my life is," he goes on desperately; pushing away from his forehead the hair, damp and matted with the cold sweat of that agony. "You have sounded all the depths of its hideous emptiness; have not I read it often in the pity of your face? You know what—but for you—it might have been! Honest and just as you are, do you dare to look me in the face and tell me that you owe me no reparation?"

At his words she gives a low cry. Is not this her own thought that is now bodied out

in his words? Is not this the doubt that for a week past has been giving her fevered nights and troubled wakings? this, that now, dressed as certainty, so blackly fronts her? This is her doing then! It is she that has brought him to this pass. She flings her arms up and clasps her hands with a gesture of uttermost despair.

"It is dark!" she says stammeringly; "oh! dark! dark! What greater depth of darkness can there be than when wrong wears right's face? Right!—wrong!" she repeats a little wildly; "the one is a word, and the other is a word; and I do not know which is which! but yet—but yet" (lifting her haggard eyes uncertainly) "I know that on the other side of this night God's day is shining, though no gleam—none—comes to me here now!"

Her voice dies away in a sob; and, for a while, there is a miserable silence. Then Anthony breaks once again into unsteady speech.

"If you think that it is only a mad unreflecting rage of mere passion that has brought me here," he says in a thick low voice, "you are wrong! I think that any such would fall dead under the rebuke of your eyes! Joan, you were always calling me to rise to the better life; I tell you I cannot! without you I cannot! I summon you to a task that is worthy of you! Joan, I adjure you, come to me, and show me how to believe again that there are such things as charity, reverence, high-hearted selflessness in the world! In the atmosphere in which I live, I am fast growing to disbelieve in the existence of such things! In the name of all justice, all compassion, help me to rebuild my faith!"

As he speaks she turns, and facing him, fixes him with a steadfast regard. The wildness has gone out of her eyes, they have resumed their look of infinite pity, of meek unmeasured woe.

"This is my punishment then," she says in an intense low voice; "I am fitly chastised for my presumption in thinking that my love for you was of so high and pure a quality that no unclean thing could come nigh it. I would have meddled with the functions of the angels," she says, "and now" (breaking into an agony of sobbing) "what basest, vilest among women could have dragged you lower, or sunk you deeper, than I have!"

Again there is a silence, broken only by the slender woodland noises. Anthony has thrown himself on the ground, and suddenly covered his face with his hands as if to take shelter from that gaze of hers, intolerable else. By and by she speaks again. "I did you a wrong," she says very humbly, in a soft and broken voice; "a great wrong; I see it now. I would have loved you better than other women loved, and instead I loved you worse! I wanted to be kinder to you than any

other, and instead, I have been crueller than any! I made a mistake, and in my obstinacy and self-opinion I clave to it in the face of all reason and sense. Yes, I did you a wrong, and for that" (her self-command giving way a little) "I have been asking your pardon on my heart's knees for the last two years and a half! If it makes your pain any easier to know that I suffer too, well, then, I can truly tell you that in all God's armoury I think there is no sharper sword than that with which I am to-day smitten."

At the exceeding gentleness and ruth of her tone, he takes courage to drop his shielding hands. It is no longer the upbraiding angel that speaks—it is the woman who loved him and lay in his arms. He lifts his miserable gray eyes haggardly to hers.

"Day and night, day and night, day and night!" he says, with a slow and dragging emphasis; "Joan, have you counted how many days and nights there are in fifty

years? we are strong and healthy!—there is no reason why we should not live for fifty years!"

The dark apathetic despair of his voice makes her own heart sink lead-heavy within her. She sits down on the leafy couch of herbs and moss beside him. In neither attitude nor look is there any smallest shrinking from him.

"It is dark!—dark!" she says, in an awed whisper; then after a pause, lifting to his her streaming eyes, in which there is yet a ray of purest, tenderest heaven-light, "Anthony!" she says solemnly, "whether it be ten, or twenty, or fifty years, I think that neither you nor I will be able to bear our lives unless we lay fast hold of the thought, that out of our mistakes God builds up His completeness."

There is a long, long silence. Those last high words of hers have tied the young man's tongue, and stemmed the torrent of his

agonised mad pleading. Of what use any longer to stretch out his empty rash arms to hers. She has soared beyond their reach. In utter dumbness they sit side by side; he has again covered his face with his hands. Only a low groan of extremest pain now and then disturbs the stillness. The green gloom of the wood has grown deeper; the night is gently falling.

By and by, with a long soft sigh, Joan slowly rises to her feet. Her movement rouses her companion from his stupor. For a moment, before she can stop him, he has thrown himself prone before her in the grass.

"Trample me!" he says in a hoarse, rough voice. "I am not worthy that you should set your dear feet on my neck! Oh! high pure love!" (lifting his bowed head and his face disfigured and furrowed by tears,) "who have ever vainly striven to lift me to your level, forgive me that brute-like, following my

nature, I have striven to drag you down to mine!"

At his words she stretches out both her hands to him, with a solemn smile of pardon and farewell.

"Love," she says very sweetly, while, for the last time, her blue eyes wetly dwell on his—"for this once I may call you so, seeing that it is as if I stood by your deathbed—love, you used to tell me that I was your guardian angel—your better self! and of all your tender names there were none that I so dearly loved; perhaps it is a foolish thought, but suffer me to keep them still! suffer me to think that by and by, in the after-time, when life is going hardly with you—when the earth-fogs close around you, and the satyr-voices call you down—that then, perhaps, my face and my voice, which hitherto have brought you nothing but disquiet and woe, may be present with you in memory, as a solace and a sustainment!"

Then, without another word, she slowly draws away her hands from his, and with one solemnest good-bye smile, passes away from him into the falling night.

POSTSCRIPT.

FRIENDS, are you content thus to leave Joan? Are you willing thus to let the curtain fall over her? If so, read no further. If not, let me by all means lift a corner of it for you; by all means look once again. If, two years later than the incidents related in the last chapter, you had, on one dewy bright morning of late summer, carefully read your *Times* advertisement sheet, you would undoubtedly have seen among the deaths this insertion:

"On the 5th instant, at 8, Curzon Street, suddenly, of apoplexy, Lalage, wife of Anthony Wolferstan, late Col. Grenadier Guards, aged 28."

I say no more!

FINIS.

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